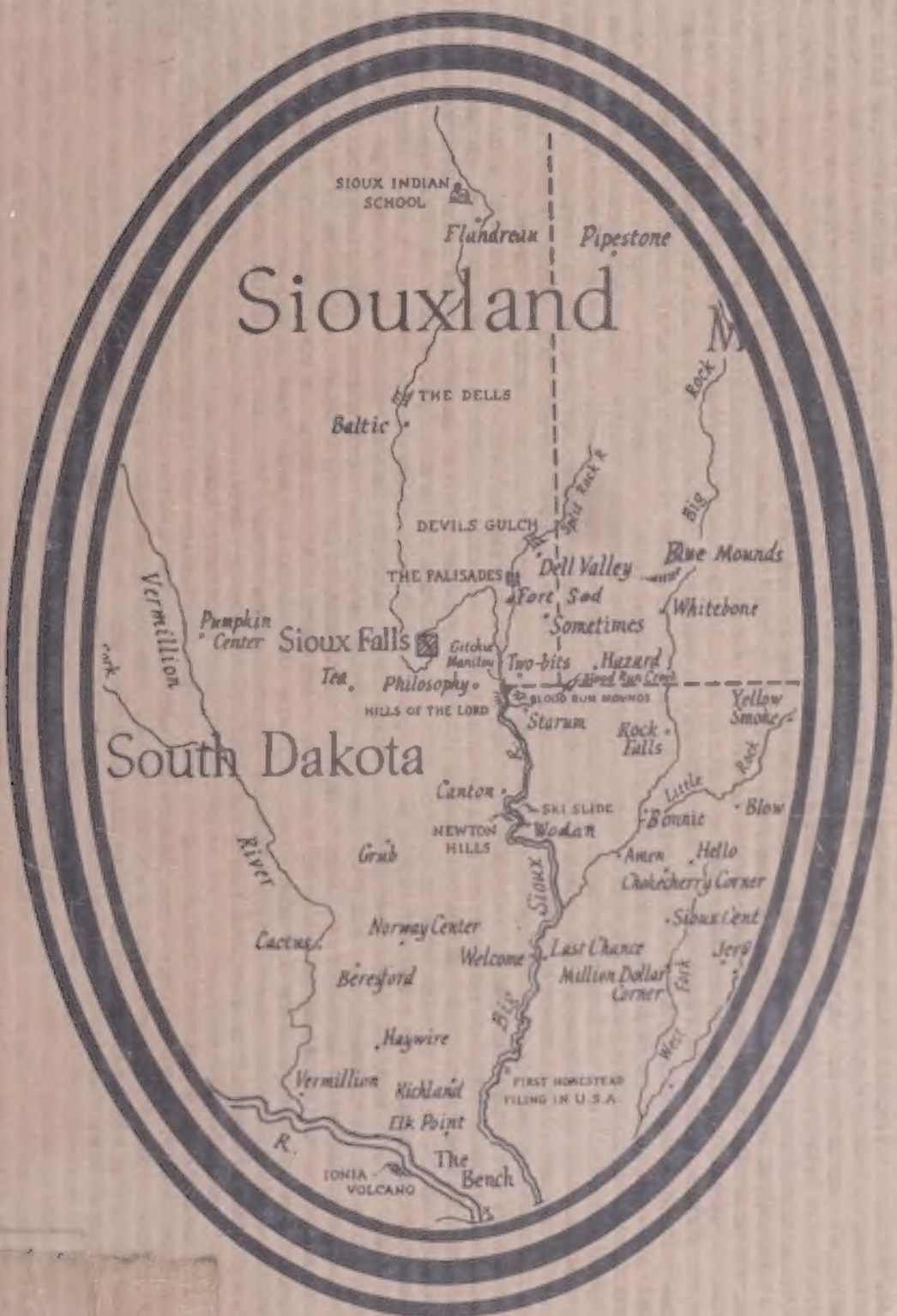
This is the Year



Frederick Manfred

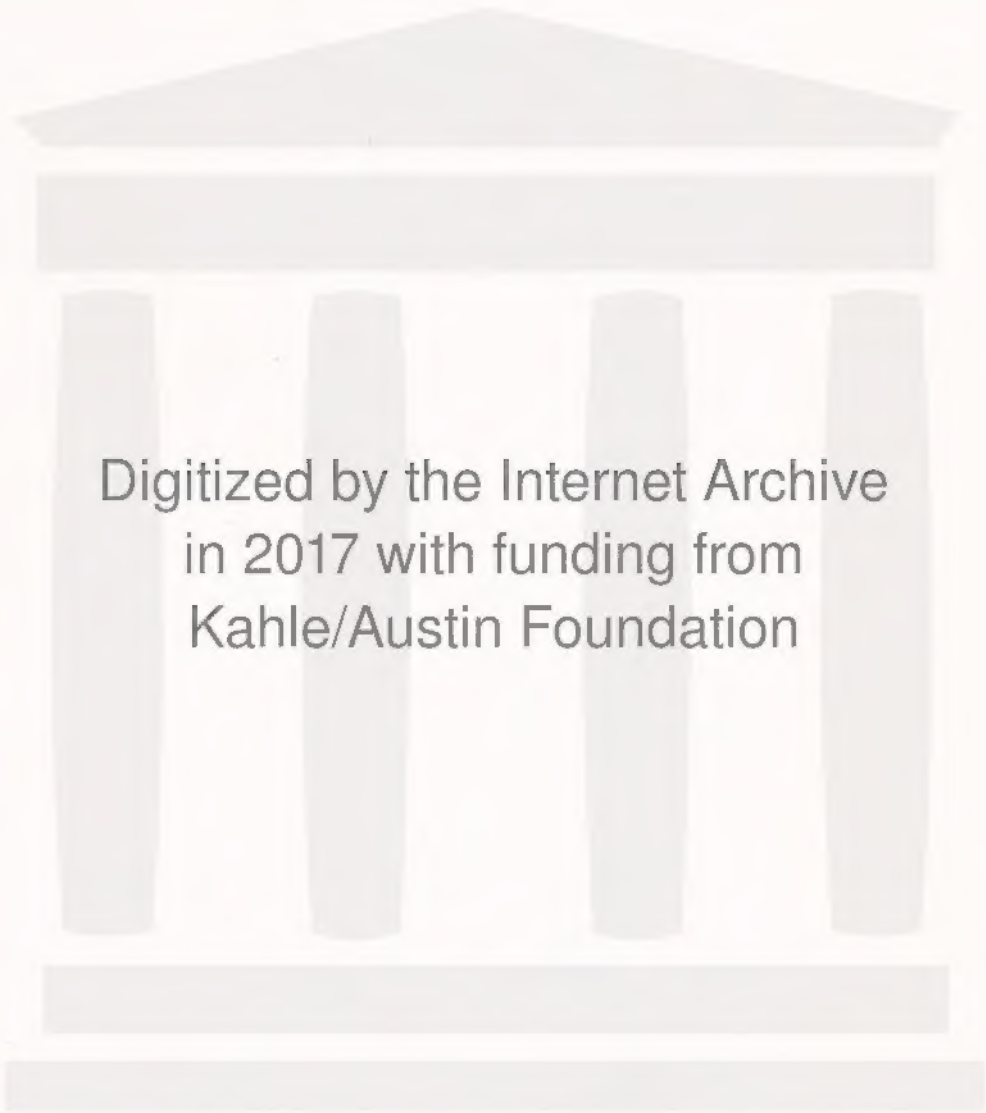
With a new introduction by Max Westbrook

"It has been quite a while since we had a novel as big, solid, and dramatic as *This is the Year*. Mr. Manfred is somebody to read."

— New York *Herald Tribune*

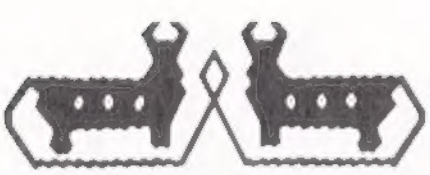
This is the Year (1947) tells with courage and honesty the story of Pier Frixen, an American farmer in the early 20th century who struggles against the depression and the violence of nature as well as the personal problems of differing cultures and the generation gap. Most of all, he battles against himself, hurting as much as he loves. The setting is Manfred's semimythical, marvellously authentic "Siouxland" — the harsh, Calvinist region of the upper midwest where Minnesota, South Dakota, Nebraska and Iowa join — a geographical and artistic creation reminiscent of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or Sinclair Lewis' Gopher Prairie. Manfred unifies the loves and rages of Pier and makes him a convincing individual by his artistry and devotion to the specific which makes the local universal. The theme here is really the exploration of the American character as it expresses itself within the boundaries of this region. The world is best seen from the vantage point of home, and Manfred brilliantly explores man's larger concerns in terms of a particular place, his beloved Siouxland.

State of Vermont
Department of Libraries
Northeast Regional Library
P. O. Box 188
St. Johnsbury, Vt. 05819

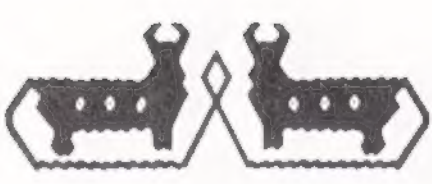

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2017 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/thisisyear00manf

This is the Year



The Gregg Press Western Fiction Series
Priscilla Oaks, Editor



This is the Year

Frederick Manfred

with a new introduction by

Max Westbrook

Gregg Press

A division of G. K. Hall & Co., Boston, 1979

With the exception of the Introduction, this is a complete photographic reprint of a work first published in Garden City, NY by Doubleday & Company, Inc. in 1947.

The trim size of the original hardcover edition was 5¾ by 8½ inches.

Text copyright © 1947 by Frederick Feikema Manfred

Reprinted by arrangement with the author's agent

Introduction copyright © 1979 by Max Westbrook

Frontmatter designed by Designworks, Inc. of Cambridge, Massachusetts

Printed on permanent/durable acid-free paper and bound in the United States of America.

Republished in 1979 by Gregg Press, A Division of G. K. Hall & Co., 70 Lincoln St., Boston, Massachusetts 02111

First Printing, September 1979

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Manfred, Frederick Feikema, 1912–
This is the year.

(Gregg Press western fiction series)
Reprint of the ed. published by Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y.; with new introd.
I. Title. II. Series.
PZ3.M313705Th 1979 [PS3525.A52233] 813'.5'4 79-14446
ISBN 0-8398-2580-3

Introduction

Frederick Manfred's *This is the Year* tells with courage and honesty a story that is central to the primal world. Pier Frixen, the main character, loves the Iowa land he farms, loves his family, works with the devotion of a saint, persists through disasters with the determination of a hero, and ends — having lost more than most could bear to lose — singing down the road, his pride and fierce, loving spirit as strong as ever.

That much, alone, would be a fairy tale, or a sermon. The story, the entanglement with the world, comes in Manfred's portrayal of an equally intrinsic part of Pier's character. To list the items in this part of the story — separating them temporarily, unfairly — is shocking: Pier also kicks his aged parents out of their own home, kills the personality of his loving and lovely wife by the cruelty of his own personality, destroys the love of a bright and devoted son who is prematurely eager to work by his side, ruins the land he loves even though a good man has carefully and repeatedly explained to him how he is ruining it, and shows himself to be — in a dozen ways — blind, stubborn, selfish, intemperate, and mean.

How can such extremes of good and bad cohere in a single character? How can the story of Pier be of interest to the millions who could not match him in heroic labor or in destructive stubbornness?

Manfred unifies the loves and rages of Pier and makes him a convincing individual by his artistry and by a devotion to the specific which achieves the universal.

Specifically, Pier does not know how to love his wife, Nertha, whose name and spirit represent the earth, and cannot learn how even when told. He resents the fact that Teo, his son,

is good with books and with machines. He decides to plow his fields up and down the slopes, on a whim, and refuses to change to contour plowing when the erosion begins showing that what the county agent told him had been right. He is, apparently, the only farmer in his region who refuses to cooperate with government programs designed to help the farmer through the Great Depression. Though rebellious against the old Frisian ways of his parents, he cannot understand the more gentle rebellion of his own son.

Specifically, he is most fulfilled when he works hard, and the land produces, rewarding his labor, in accord with the primal contract he understands by knowledge of blood and bone. Curiously, Pier has three falls from great heights and survives all three, being injured only once; it is as if he had an affinity for space, for the flight of his body through space to a sometimes comic earth. And there are cultural parallels, primarily with the Abraham stories of the Bible and with themes of the promised land, the ancient covenant, seeds, and betrayal.

In general, Pier is the man who cannot compromise with the world without violating his contract with primal energy. His literary counterparts — the full originality of each writer granted — are legion. One thinks of John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*, Larry McMurtry's "Take My Saddle from the Wall: A Valediction," and dozens of other stories of fierce fathers who rage with a mystic stubbornness, a destructive dedication, who are doomed to a cruel integrity.

The special telling of *This is the Year* gives a marvelous authenticity to early 20th century America and to the territory Manfred has named Siouxland. Pier is convincing because his cruelty is modified with the tenderness and understanding a Frisian Siouxlander would be capable of achieving. His doom is held back by years of triumph that did occur in history. He can even touch his wife or father, on occasion, blend with the current "he-man" camaraderie of neighboring farmers, and, once, show a brief capacity for leadership in the socio-political struggles of the Great Depression. Still, even in the times of qualification, as in Pier's beautiful afternoon of berry-picking with Teo, the exception comes on Pier's own terms, in harmony with his own primal self. Such particulars, most impor-

tantly, are one reason the story never falls into allegory. The reader's eyes, always, are caught by Pier and his desperate, human effort to found his home in a land that is also characterized by extremes.

The dramatic power of his story was recognized by critics when *This is the Year* was first published in 1947. Reviews were, as they say, "mixed," but there was high praise, and there were happy predictions for the future. In the *Chicago Sun Book Week* (March 23, 1947), for example, Manfred's talent was called "genuine," and there was reason to believe he would become "a major American novelist." Manfred's trilogy (*World's Wanderer*, 1949-51), however, was not well received, and his career came to a climax. Manfred translated his Frisian name (Feike Feikema) into English and launched into his work with renewed energies, producing, among other works, the Buckskin Man Tales: *Conquering Horse* (1959, set in the days of pre-white America), *Lord Grizzly* (1954, about Hugh Glass), *Scarlet Plume* (1964, a captivity novel), *King of Spades* (1966, based on the search for gold in the Black Hills), and *Riders of Judgment* (1957, based on the Johnson County War). Recently re-issued in paperback by Signet, these five novels have been widely praised by critics (see, for example, Joseph Flora's work, for the Boise State University Western Writers Series, and *Western American Literature, passim*). Special praise has been given to *Conquering Horse*, *Lord Grizzly*, and *Riders of Judgment*, though *King of Spades* may well prove to be even better. Since then, *Eden Prairie* (1968), *The Manly-Hearted Woman* (1975), *Milk of Wolves* (1976), and *Green Earth* (1977) have helped to establish Manfred as a major American novelist. All nine include characters comparable — with fascinating differences and with their individuality — to Pier Frixen.

The re-publication of *This is the Year* is thus an important event. We can see this early novel, now, not as promise, but as an early achievement of excellence, one which develops with startling clarity the conflict between primal energy and a present world, a story that includes Abraham and Biblical lands, the children of the 1970's and a land devastated by the practical "gods" Pier fought in dumb, saintly rage.

Max Westbrook
Austin, Texas

Scale of Miles
0 5 10
SIOUX INDIAN SCHOOL
Flandreau
Pipestone
Siouxland
Minnesota
Rock River
THE DELLS
Baltic
Salem
DEVIL'S GULCH
Split Rock
Big
Blue Mounds
Dell Valley
Fort Sod
Sometimes
Whitebone
Blue Wing
West Fork
Vermillion
Pumpkin Center
Sioux Falls
Manitou
Two-bits
Hazard
Tea
Philosophy
HILLS OF THE LORD
BLOOD RUN MOUNDS
Yellow Smoke
HIGHEST POINT IN IOWA-El 1675
OCHEYEDAN MOU
Sturum
Rock Falls
South Dakota
Canton
NEWTON HILLS
Wodan
Bonnie
Blow Out
Grub
Amen
Hello
Chokecherry Corner
Passage
Big Sioux River
Norway Center
Cactus
Siboux Center
Welcome
Last Chance
Jerusalem
Beresford
Million Dollar Corner
Manteos
MOUNDS
Yankton
Haywire
Missouri R.
Vermillion
Richland
FIRST HOMESTEAD FILING IN U S A
Le Mars
Elk Point
The Bench
Iowa
IONIA VOLCANO
FIRST DAKOTA CAMP 1804
Sioux City
Sioux
Holstein
Nebraska
LANDS END

For my father,
FEIKE FEIKES FEIKEMA, VI

CONTENTS

PRELUDE xi

BOOK ONE: THE PROMISED LAND

1. Spring 3
2. Summer 73
3. Fall 123
4. Winter 138

BOOK TWO: THE ÂLDE HAN SMILES

1. Seed 177
2. The Strange Summer 201
3. The Great Mouth Yawns 220
4. Waste 243

BOOK THREE: THE GOLDEN SUN

1. Spring Chores 293
2. God's Green Earth 332
3. Fall Days 376
4. Sing While You May 392

BOOK FOUR: THE EARTH HAS A FEVER

1. The Lily of the Valley 421
2. The Wind Blows Free 462
3. Miscarriage 483
4. A Rooster, a Hen, a Doughnut 507

BOOK FIVE: GOD'S COUNTRY

1. The Gentle Heifer 533
2. The Summer Anger 558
3. But She Wouldn't 583
4. The Everlasting Weird 601

POSTLUDE 615

GLOSSARY 617

PRELUDE

AND SPRING CAME OUT OF THE GULF IN EARLY FEBruary and awoke a wintering cock robin in a Memphis tree.

The cock robin stirred on his toothpick legs, and fluffed a wing, and pecked a louse from his fat orange breast. He blinked a white-ringed eye, and glanced at his mate still sleeping on the twig beside him. The plump robin chucked, peeped, sang a few notes. And then, stretching his feathers, was off, winging his way to the northland.

The robin flew in swoops: some long and tiring, some quick and inquiring. And always he fanned out his white tail feathers plainly in flight.

Sometimes he circled down to a lawn, and ran a few steps, and

cocked his black head, and dug up white grubs. Other times he caught bugs on the fly. Or paused to sing on a fence: four peals of silvery gurgling music.

The robin flew up the vast valley of the levee-lapping Mississippi, over its flat bayous and bogs, over its abrupt cliffs and bluffs, soaring on the lift of a warming south wind. He flew through gray envelopes of misting rain; he flew through heaven-high cones of sunshine.

By the first of March he saw fuzzy beards growing on the groves at the confluence of the Ohio and the Father of Waters.

By mid-March he was in St. Louis. He dived through the city's smog and landed on a whitening plum-tree limb. He fluffed his feathers, and picked at a speck moving over his brittle toes, and dug furiously under his left wing, and peeped, and fell asleep. And in the morning, awakening, chucking, burst into a continuous, loud, red-throated carol.

The cock robin circled, and turned up the Ol' Muddy, the Missouri, flew into the northwest.

He wing-wapped over wriggling tributaries: the Osage, the Grand, the Kansas. He veered past tiny creeks oozing from the cut bluffs below Omaha. He flapped over the mile-wide, inch-deep, dribbling Platte, where the flatfish live and the grasshoppers wade in the swimming holes.

On and on he beelined north, up, up, northward, up the great wide flyway, over Onawa, Tekamah, past the country of the Winnebago.

All along the bird flyway, spring followed the robin, was always there to greet him, bearding the side-stream trees with yellow-green. Spring quickened the blue-land angleworms. Spring swilled the silt-fat valleys with rains and sunshines.

The cock robin winged on, north.

At last, in late March, he arrived in Siouxland. He wheeled over the oak-crested, doming hills north of Sioux City, flew up the Big Sioux River, resting in elms and basswoods.

He sang cheerily.

He flew on, over Last Chance, Iowa, and Welcome, South Dakota, over the Big Sioux bridge that tied the two together. Up, up, ever north, along the continental runway.

High aloft, from high above the Newton Hills, he sighted the Hills of the Lord ahead. Below the land rolled away to the east and the west in outspread, immane, undulating sweeps of prairie, reaching out to the cloud fountains on the horizon.

And finally the cock robin sighted Blood Run Creek, southeast of Sioux Falls. With a banking of wapping wings, he turned east along its coulee draw. He rose with the sloping land a half mile, then sailed up and out of the draw, and crossed an old stubble field. He lighted in a farmer's grove of cottonwood and maple. He hopped around, caroling, going from tree to tree, looking, seeking, singing, calling and calling, happy at last he had found his true country.

He crossed the yard and lighted on the limb of a box elder near the farmer's house. The twigs of a limb brushed against the white trim of a second-story window. The robin hopped up the limb's brown, corrugated bark until he reached a fork. He cocked his black head. He pecked his yellow bill into the soft bark of a twig. He swallowed a bud. He rubbed his black-white chin in his orange breast feathers. He hopped excitedly. The fork in the branch was it.

Night came on, and the robin doubled his head under his wing, and slept.

Bright morning came and he cheered forth a great long song, yodeling beauteous peals of love into the red skies, calling, calling, halloing aloud for his mate. He sang loud all day long, calling, calling.

And more robins flew over, up from the south, going over, going north, up the Big Sioux, up the turtle-lazy Red River stream, on into Canada land. And cock robin greeted them all, and held to his branch in the box elder. He sang, and waited for his lover to come.

She came at dusk, and she answered him, and hopped up the branch beside him, and pecked a fleck from his glowing red breast. And they loved together, and open-mouthed they whirred the whisper song into the dark of the night.

Bright, early, quick in the morning she began building their home. She brought weed stalks; she brought rags; she brought old rotted strings; twine; and she wove them into a rough cup. From a hole by the cattle tank she brought mud, catching her yellow bill full of soft purple ooze. She carried it into the nest, and lined it, and packed it, and pushed it neatly into place with her twig-toes and dull-red breast, turning around and around in it, circling, packing.

And cock robin sang, pealing his song, budding phrases of continuous melody, singing of future times.

Spring was here, cock robin said, spring was here, and blue eggs were coming, and roblings, and all the summer long.

BOOK ONE

THE PROMISED LAND

1. SPRING

. 1 .

DAY WAS A SONG.

A mile and a half away, the bells above Starum's town hall began to clang out the six o'clock morning call:

Sing! the day will be a song.
Cleng! the sun is dawning strong.
Ring! the morning air is clear.
Cleng! the hoe awaits the hand.
Sing! the day is running sand.

Pier Frixen, tall and young, threw back the yellow checkered quilt from his warm bed, turned on his buttocks, swung his feet to

the floor. He ran his thick-knuckled fingers through his sandy, red hair. His light blue eyes sparkled.

This was the day. He could scarcely believe it. By nightfall he and Nertha Andringa of Dell Valley would be married. Nertha, earthy as the loess that lay on his prairie farm, with her green eyes and peach-round breasts, with limbs as slender as summer creeks and silver hair so long it reached below her waist, she would be beside him on this very bed tonight, in these crisp warm sheets, beneath him, a mate. He shook his head. He could not believe it. He was sure that she would reconsider before he got there and choose Domeny Beckstrom of Dell Valley, Old White Wings Himself. He held his whirling brain in his hands.

Yet she had wanted him. The night that the northern lights had flashed over the world, as he was leaving, she had brushed against him in the doorway, had pressed her bending softnesses against his arm, had said, "Why, Pier, of course it's you."

"Even though you know what ye're gettin'?"

"Yes." Her large green eyes held him.

"A farmer who can't read or write?"

She smiled shyly. "You know how to read an' write with the plow, don't you?"

"Wal, yeh."

"An ye're bringin' yer buildin' nails to the weddin' bed, ain't you?"

"Wal, yeh. Sure. Course."

"What else is there then?"

Pier dared a look at her. "You sure you don't want Old White Wings?"

"No."

"He can read and write, an' predict eclipses, y'u know."

"Oh, Pier."

Pier shook his head again. How vivid was that night. He jumped up and ran to the east second-story window, crossing and recrossing his hound-thin legs beneath his nightshirt. He threw up the window and looked out of the steep-roofed house. He breathed noisily in the March air. He sang:

"Oh, braid her a crown of clover,
Braid it pink and green and silver."

He looked out over the gray lawn where last year's grass lay tangled. There, and there, would Nertha walk. There would she grow a ring of flowers. There, underneath the grapevined archway over the gate, would she walk into the garden. Apple trees south of the house would hide her with white-pink blossoms.

He looked out toward the fields. There, and there would he walk: on the east big fifty sow grain; in the north little fifty plant corn—and next year rotate the crops. And there to the northeast, in the meadow at the foot of Red Bluff, would he mow his thirteen acres of alfalfa and his fourteen acres of high slough grass.

The pasture running along the entire west side of his quarter section was out of sight. But in his mind's eye he saw himself going along. There, behind a line of clean black-and-white cows would he come, swinging up from the lowland, up the lane for milking time. And there, in the hog pasture to the southwest, just behind the blood-red barns, would he raise his prize Hampshire reds.

He closed the window. He hurried back to his bed, sat down, jerked off his nightshirt. He fumbled under the bed for his winter underwear; then remembered that the night before he had taken a bath in the chilly kitchen and had laid out his spring wear on the chair by his bed. Laughing at himself, he reached for it. He winked at the window, as if to someone peeking in. "Sure. Spring an' my weddin' day. I can't be loaded down with a lot a extry baggage right from the start. Got to travel light. Yip."

He buckle-kneed down the narrow stairs, sniffed at the kitchen air, loaded a scoop of cobs into the nickel-trimmed kitchen range, spilled a sprinkle of kerosene over the fuel, struck a match, and in a moment heard the flames roaring up the elbowed stovepipe. He filled the kettle with fresh water, threw a spoon of dried tea leaves into the teapot, set it ready to hand on the back of the stove.

The brass pulldown lamp with its glass crystals hung crooked. He straightened it. The red velvet-covered placard with its silver letters GOD IS THE HEAD OF THIS HOUSE hung askew too and he leveled it. The yellow wall behind it felt cool to the touch.

He drew on his blue denim jacket, his sagging blue cap, his red rubber boots. He loaded a few pieces of wood into the stove so the fire would hold until he came back. He stepped out onto the east porch, stood a moment to breathe the crisp air.

Dawn. White-yellow limned the slow swell in the land a quarter of a mile away to the east.

He filled his lungs once more; then stepped outdoors.

The drying, gray-brown soil in the yard was almost free of frost. He kicked a toe into the surface. The crumbly humus was loose two inches down.

He broke off a twig from a nearby box elder. It was just beginning to knot with buds. He chewed its juicy bark. It was bitter.

He noticed a robin's nest in the fork of a branch. A scolding redbreast hopped over the gray lawn ahead of him.

He stepped across the yard. He opened a small swing gate west of the house, entered a mucky barnyard. With a quick backlash of his left hand, he released the brake on the windmill. The mill head, riding at the very tiptop of a wooden derrick, opened a little. The next moment a breeze caught it. And sighing like a reluctant hired hand, it spread its arms, its wooden flaps, and began softly to turn, creaking and moaning.

He strode toward the red barn, calling over his shoulder, "Ca'boys, ca'boys," to the horses: Queen and Daise, the bay trotters; Maid and Mell, the grays; and Colonel and Topsy, the blacks. "Ca'boys, ca'boys." His voice rang. "Ca'boys."

The animals looked up from the butt of a straw pile they were feeding on. They eyed him. Swishing their tails, they started for the door. He opened it, and led them into the barn. They followed like sheep.

He leaped over a manger into the feed alley, threw in a few forkfuls of hay that he had thrown down from the haymow the night before. He scooped up a few pans of oats out of the feedbin. He fed all six to keep them in the habit of associating food with his call. Sure that they were in their stalls and munching contentedly, he went around behind them to halter each to a manger.

He whistled to himself, sometimes curving his lips to warble sweet high trebles. Sometimes he sang. One song was his own:

I am a farmer on the Sioux,
I laugh at all of you.
My barn is full of purebred stock
I laugh at bloat and pock.

My pasture sounds with bull and boar,
I laugh at pest and war.
My cribs are gold with corn and wheat,
I laugh at drought and heat.
My bed is warm with wool and sheet,
I laugh at frost and sleet.
Oh! I laugh at all of you!

Once more he leaped into the alley. He called to the sleeping cows, "Ca'baas, ca'baas. Time t'get up. C'mon, you pokes." Like camels at a watering, the black-and-white Frisian-Holsteins[1] got to their feet. He poured little mounds of ground corn and linseed-oil meal on the cement feeding troughs before them. He slipped his lean body quickly through an empty stanchion. He walked behind the prone cows, tapping their rumps, starting them into action. "C'mon, you lazy pokes. Up with y'u. This is my weddin' day an' I gotta get you milked before I go. Up. Up. Yup y'u go. An' yi now." He slapped them: Horny, Kicker, Three-Tit, Skinny, Bobtail, Reddy, and Stingtail.

Maybelle, his favorite, was already up. He stopped to pat her rump. She was his heaviest milker. And she was also good beef. Out of her he planned to raise a stram of Frisian-Holsteins that would be the envy of his neighbors, be the best in Iowa, maybe the best in Siouxland. Already he had a long yearling from her, Princess, a sleek, naughty black-and-white, ready for the bull in a couple of months. Maybelle was the great-granddaughter of Âlde Beppe,[1] the cow that Pa, Âlde Romke, had taken with him from Âld Fryslân, Europe, along with the bull, Pa Hengist. With a wink Âlde Romke had named the bull after the prolific Frisian ancient, Hengist. Hengist was also close to Hynst, the Frisian word for stallion.

Pier patted Maybelle again. "Yessir. A real cow. A real one. Big. Easygoing. Just like my Ma Lysbeth. Yeh, an' Nertha too. Great big wimmen, all of 'em. Big enough to drop calves between steps. All they need to do is t'take a little longer one, an' there's yer calf."

He whistled, sang:

"I am a farmer on the Sioux,
I laugh at all of you."

[1]For this and all other unusual (mostly Frisian) words in the novel see Glossary in back.

He went through the north door, carrying a pail of water and a basket of feed. He walked toward the cattle shed to the west where he had locked up the bull, Âlde Hengist, who, though he bore the same surname, was no relative of Âlde Romke's first bull. Pier had tied up the bull to keep him away from Princess. She was beginning to betray an interest in him. Pier poured the ground corn into a trough. With a rush, the buffalo-bulky creature brushed him aside and began to gulp up the dry, dusty meal. Pier laughed.

He went across the barnyard to the hog house, southwest of the barn.

Down a slope almost a mile to the west a fringe of trees lined the banks of the Big Sioux River. The rising bluffs of South Dakota—Âlde Romke called them the Hills of the Lord—lay beyond. The hills lifted Pier. He filled his lungs with song.

He cleaned the water trough, threw over a few scoops of shelled corn into the hopper for the pig-heavy red Hampshire sows, and started for the house again. The tea water would be hot by now.

He sluffed through the muddy barnyard. The animals had torn up the manure-sticky loess. He passed through the gate by the windmill and crossed the gray grass near the garden. He looked up and saw smoke lifting from the kitchen chimney. It curved upward and northward in a slow circle.

He stopped to admire the white frame clapboard house. Âlde Romke and an old Norwegian pioneer carpenter had taken turns at building it, with the Norwegian winning out in the matter of influence. Originally it had been built like a Frisian barn, with gables to the east and west. Later on Âlde Romke had hired a carpenter to put a wing on the north end, giving it the shape of an L, with a porch and front entrance in the crook facing the northeast. Still later, the carpenter had been hired again to build a wing onto the south end, giving it the look of an uncompleted cross, ⊦. The building stood over a commodious cement-walled cellar in which were stored quantities of canned food, bins of potatoes, barrels of paper-wrapped apples, crocks of pickles in brine, jerks of smoked beef and smoked ham and smoked bacon. The cellar door lay in the crook facing the southeast.

He entered the house and found the water boiling. He poured some over the tea leaves in the pot and placed it warm and snug beneath a tea cozy to set. He filled the stove with cobs and wood again.

He stood in the doorway, facing the east. The light on the rim of the turning earth spread. It became golden. A flood of cream came toward him from the dawn. Old cornstalks in the east sixty gleamed. In two months he would have the land disked and in grain. Waving brushes of oats would leap from the earth.

He rubbed his rough hands together. He stepped outdoors to smell the new seasons coming in from the east. He pushed his blue woolen cap from his brow. In the pink luminescence of the morning his wavy hair brightened to red-gold.

He was certain a wonderful year lay ahead; a year in which he was sure to make a go of it, sure to fill the empty bins, sure to win where Âlde Romke always lost.

The thought of Âlde Romke was sobering. The frail little man, his father, now seventy-two, had almost lost the 160-acre homestead, had almost buried it under mortgages. Another year and the Frixens would have lost everything. Pier was glad that he had finally gathered up enough courage to force Âlde Romke to step down and let him farm the land. It was too bad, of course, that Âlde Romke's dream of establishing a new race of Free Frisians and a pure line of Frisian-Holstein cattle had been shattered, that the long trek from Âld Fryslân, Europe, to northwest Iowa in Siouxland had been for nothing in his eyes, but such was life. If the old man couldn't learn to farm the American way, with big fields, many horses, some machines, couldn't learn to do the right thing at the right time, that was his hard luck. Âlde Romke had been too used to the flat sloughs of Âld Fryslân where three acres were enough to keep body stuck to soul, where a man was able to farm in straight lines and square corners, where a man could wrestle a living from the woman-earth with a hoe.

Pier stood facing the east. He whispered to himself, thinking of those defeats. He swore a solemn vow. "This year I'll do 'er. This year. Just watch," he murmured. "Just watch me go."

A momentary feeling of regret, a twinge, stirred him. He felt uneasy that he could have all this hope in his heart when in the Old Country, in Europe, the black land and warm homes were being unraveled by senseless hands pulling triggers. Pier shivered, and blinked, and forced his mind back to the pleasant things again, to hope, to dreams. "Yes. This year. This is the year we'll do 'er. Just watch me go."

He was a strong and towering bull of a young man, red hair flaming, blue eyes afire with daring, chin jutting. Laughing, he shook his fist at the morning sky, stamped his red boots on the soft gray-brown earth, felt the crumbly, springy soil quaking beneath his feet.

He rejoiced. Birthing time had come again. He cleared his eyes of winter's filming webs. Passion whirlpooled in his veins. The winds of adversity could not bow him down.

It was spring and time to seed. It was time to cut his furrow on the land with a plow. It was time to cut his name on the stone of the future with a son.

Shaved, cheeks pink, he slapped the lines lightly over the backs of Queen and Daise, the trotters, and the sleek black buggy sprang from the yard. He drew a yellow, summer duster over his knees to protect his gray coat and stiff Sunday suit from the flying mud.

He drove up the lane. Turning east, he sped up the highway. Swiftly the fresh horses drew him up the lifting swell of the prairie.

It was already after ten and the sun was high. Gray wooden fence posts sparkled on the sunward side. The world-sky was immense, and blue from horizon to horizon.

When he reached the top of the swell, he stopped the horses. They barely puffed. He smiled at their power, at the balled-up speed in their thighs. He twisted in his seat to have a look at the land. To the south, it swelled and rose and lifted; and fell, a vast and slow-waved ocean of thick brown waters, dotted with farmyards, and went on and on until twenty miles away a speckling village water tower pricked a white-edged horizon. To the east, the land rolled away in even longer swells, and high hummocks, with farmyards again everywhere, and the earth-curve plainly visible. To the north, Red Bluff rose, the hill that Âlde Romke worshiped because it reminded him of the legendary Reaklif of Âld Fryslân. Beyond it, in a dip, ran Blood Run Creek coming from the east. He leaned out of the buggy to look back at his farm a little below him. It fell gently toward the Big Sioux River. Beyond the Big Sioux rose the magnificent Hills of the Lord. It was great land.

In a flash he saw again the years Âlde Romke had often described, the time when Âlde Romke had come alone to this sweet country, waist-deep in grass and flowers, how he had broken the sod, had built a house from it, had built a barn from timber, had set up a

fence with saplings from the creek; how he had sown the land by hand, had dreamed and hoped for many sons from his towering wife, Ma Lysbeth.

Pier whistled. Sang. He smelled the air. Laughed.

He touched the lines and the two horses bounded forward. The wheels sang. Slow circles of reversing light turned on the whirring spokes.

Shreddy mist clouds rose out of the southwest where the Big Sioux rammed and doubled its way through buckled bluffs. The clouds came up rapidly. He sang at them:

"*When the Lord God starts his thunderin'*
Mankind quakes and stands a-wonderin'."

The shadows came up swiftly from the southwest. They crossed the pasturelands of the Grimoviches' south of Pier's farm. They shadowed him. The brightness on the land vanished. The cornstalks and wooden fence posts were suddenly drab. He touched the lines again and the horses leaped. Their tails, which Pier never docked because he loved flowing things, undulated like long black veils. The wheels started up a slow moan of speed.

At the corner ahead he saw Red Joe Faber, his nearest neighbor to the east, repairing a fence post. Pier's eyes lighted up.

Red Joe was a short, bowlegged man, with burned blond hair. He was wearing a dusty blue cap and a washed blue overall and jacket. Red Joe never had much to say to a stranger, but, when he did, it was like a fist hitting behind the ears. Both Pier and Red Joe would sometimes promise to see each other more often; but, somehow, never did, probably because Red Joe had a wife and three children. A married man didn't make too good a buddy for a single man with hunt in the eye. Perhaps now that Pier himself was getting married they might at last become real friends. Pier grinned to himself when he remembered that to the boys in Starum he and Red Joe were known as Mutt and Jeff.

Pier turned the horses around the corner, facing them north, and stopped. "Hi, neighbor," he called.

"Hi. Where you goin' all dolled up?"

Pier raised a red brow. "Why, to my weddin'. Don't you remember?"

Red Joe chewed his quid of tobacco a moment, turned to one side,

spat, then hit his stubby knee. "So that was it. I knew there was something I forgot today."

"Some friend you are."

"Yeh. Well, I got a lot a things on my mind."

"Uh-huh. Just as I thought. Now I know what my neighbor really thinks a me."

"You mean, what yer neighbor really thinks of married life." Red Joe spat again. "Pier, let me give you one more warnin'. This is yer last chance to back out. Man, make the most of it. Skip the country. Every married man in his right sense will be behind you one hundred per cent if you do."

"Huh."

"Man, I'm warnin' y'u, ye're gettin' into a mess."

"That's what you think."

Red Joe chewed and pulled his blue cap deep over his wind-red face. "Well, Pier, maybe you'll be the lucky one. But, as the feller says, 'If I had it to do over again, I'd marry me a hay bag an' have heaven on earth.'"

"Aw, now."

"Really. It ain't fun livin' with a glum-pot, a crooked rib, a . . ."

Pier laughed. "Take it easy. First thing you know you'll talk me out of it." He laughed again. "Wal, I gotta be on or I'll be late."

Red Joe shook his head dolefully. "Ye're just like a moth. Rushin' to get into the fire."

"So long."

"So long." Red Joe waved a hammer.

Pier flicked the lines and the horses leaped.

Pier drove along the east side of his farm. The swell lay between him and the yard. He could barely see the box elders and the cottonwoods.

The horses caught at the flying earth. The buggy slithered to one side, swung to the other, straightened into flight again. Blobs of mud flew up high behind the wheels.

The land leveled and began to drop. A half mile and it fell toward Blood Run Creek. He passed the chokecherry-lined lane of Widow Kaia's eighty across on the right. He saw her standing on the yard, slim, wearing bright clothes. Her sloping yard, as usual, was littered with broken boxes, dead chickens, machinery; it was a slipping sea

flaked with scud. He waved, and almost rose from his seat when she waved back. A moment later, just as he went past Red Bluff on his left, he saw the village of Starum spread out below, a quarter of a mile off to the northeast. It lay scattered on the floor of the valley like the higgledy-piggledy dumping of a child's building blocks.

The sagging clouds dragged low. He looked up and touched the horses again, laughing. A rain would be good for the land. The frost was going and the loess would suck up the moisture like a sponge.

Far down the road, he spied a man walking primly along. He studied the walk. The figure wavered and stumbled. It fell. Pier sat erect. He watched the man clamber out of the ditch, watched him right himself and brush his trousers. The man went on, his neat steps stabbing the muddy road. Pier nodded. It was Peter Puddicombe, the thirty-year-old son of the Earl of Kancastra. He had been nicknamed Blacktail because his Prince Albert coat made him look like a crow. Pier recalled the stories about young Peter's father, the old earl, how he had staked out a cattle ranch in 1880, had tried to live on it like a king, with fox and hounds, and butler, and carousal and lordly airs. Pier snorted. Such high monkey-monks were at last coming to their reward, as they were bound to. The drunk son ahead was a good-for-nothing.

Blacktail had never been worth a damn. Ten years ago, when Pier was fourteen years old, Âlde Romke had hired him for a summer. Blacktail had been more of a hindrance than a help, had ruined more cows and horses than he and the old earl had ever been worth. Even Âlde Romke, who had heart-forgiveness for people's errors, had not been able to tolerate his faults.

As Pier came close, he pulled up the horses, wondering to himself what could have lured the stilty drunk into the open country at this time of the day. The man was like a tomcat, caught by the forenoon sun. Though Queen and Daise snorted, Blacktail kept nineing ahead in the mud, the coattails of his black Prince Albert flapping.

"Hi there, neighbor," Pier called. "Want a lift?"

Blacktail paused, his legs an awkward step apart. His curt black mustache quirked. "Huh?"

"Want a lift?" To himself Pier thought, "Land alive, is this bird down. He's gutter-down."

"Come again?"

"I said, 'Y'u want a lift?' "

"Oh. Sure. I guess not." Though liquor had slowed Blacktail's tongue, his words were clear.

"Wal, get in. Take a load off yer feet an' sit down."

Pier reached out to help the thin-limbed man. Blacktail slid onto the seat like a frozen fish. Pier spread the yellow blanket over the other's knees.

Sniffing, Pier released the lines a bit and without a word the bays leaned into a trot.

"Wal, neighbor, how goes it?" Pier asked.

"All right."

"A little wet to be out walkin', ain't it?"

"Lord, yes."

"Been drinkin'?"

"Some."

"Tomcattin'?"

Blacktail smiled.

Pier observed, "A man'd almost think you'd run dry one a these years."

Blacktail continued to smile. With half-closed eyes he idly watched the rolling rumps of the trotters.

"Someday some woman's gonna pull that wild hair a yers."

Blacktail's gray eyes closed tiredly.

They approached Blood Run Creek; it burrowed through a deep gully just ahead. The road swung east toward Starum.

Pier asked, "Kin I bring you home?"

"If you want to."

Pier studied the plank-thin figure beside him. He grumbled to himself. "Huh. Âlde Romke was only part right. From shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves in two generations. Not three."

Blacktail stirred beside him, trying to clear his eyes. He said, "Well, I'd lots rather get drunk on whisky than work for a dumb farmer like your old man."

"Huh," Pier grunted, startled that he had been overheard.

"I still haven't got over the shame of working for that dumb dike-jumper."

Pier bristled. "Look, mister, we're Frisians, not Dutchmen."

"Frisians, Dutchmen, it's all the same to me. Your old man's a dumb dikejumper. And I'm sorry I ever offered to work for him."

Blacktail straightened up, fumbled for a cigarette. He found a bent tube in a side pocket, lighted it, puffed deeply. His eyes and face cleared. "Yessir. A dumb dikejumper."

Pier fumed to himself.

"It's better to starve than to root in the earth like a pig."

Pier sneered. "Or borry from your friends."

Blacktail's gray eyes flicked at Pier, looked off to one side. With an elegant gesture, Blacktail threw the barely smoked cigarette into the passing ditch. He shrugged. He sighed. "What a life."

Pier snorted. "I'll say. Blacktail, keep this up, and ye're liable to wind up in the jug one a these days. People are gettin' plenty tired of the way ye're tearin' the ass out a things. An' ruinin' nice young girls."

Blacktail's sliver-thin lips drew back, revealing even rows of chalk-white teeth. "Are you referring to Kaia, Frixen?"

Pier countered, "That where you just come from?"

Blacktail licked his lips.

Pier tightened his fingers over the lines. So that was where this pants-creased crow had been hanging out. At Kaia's. The slim woman he had seen but a few moments before had spent the night with this physical wreck then. Pier nodded. He also knew of her attractions. The gypsy-mannered little widow, who lived a lonesome life with her dim-witted brother Stephan, had often winked at him too. In fact, Pier had been so interested in her that for a long while he had seriously considered marrying her. Even now, on his way to wed Nertha, he wasn't too sure of his choice. Kaia's black eyes, which Âlde Romke swore were those of a hex, were almost a match for Nertha's childlike softnesses. Too bad Kaia was so careless in her habits. Compared to her, Nertha was angel-clean. Pier had a clear vision of Kaia: Indian-black hair and mink-black eyes, gold earrings, tangerine handkerchief and scarf, blue stone rings, purple dress, and beaded moccasins. Ah, the Widow Kaia was full of wonderful sin.

Blacktail chuckled. "Frixen, what I couldn't tell you about women. Huh. Cripes. Why, one woman in town here comes over to my room every time she gets mad at her old man. It's her way of getting revenge."

Pier stiffened.

"And why not? What the hell. I'm probably the only male around

here who gives the female a decent time of it. Most of you blokes rape your women. And leave them stunned and wondering what next."

Pier wiggled the lines. The horses sped faster. The buggy wheels hummed. He did not understand.

"Besides, if a woman takes the trouble of getting into my bed, I'm not chasing her out of it."

"I suppose that makes it good?"

"Sure. Frixen, there's one thing you better learn quick. And real quick. You've got to take things as they come. There ain't no such thing as truth and honor. And straight living. People are all crooks. All of 'em. Animals. Little minks all out trying to mink each other. And my theory is to mink the other guy before he minks me."

Pier shifted nervously. He glanced at the little village of Starum coming up swiftly. A black water tower and a columnar grain elevator loomed over a few stores. With relief, Pier sighted Blacktail's boardinghouse. He turned the horses toward it.

"Why, take last Old Year's Night. I was out with a buddy in Sioux Falls. Every Old Year's Night this buddy of mine invites me up. Gets me a woman, and he and his wife and me, we always go out on a toot. On the outside, sure, our friendship looks good. You know. Civilized. Loving each other. But underneath? Let me tell you something. The only reason he invites me up there is to give me a minking. Can't wait to do it. So, what did I do this last time but beat him to it. While everybody's drinking heavy, I pour my liquor on the floor, keep my head clear, see. And when he passed out, I took his woman."

Pier sneered. "You sure are a decent Christian citizen, ain't y'u?"

Blacktail laughed. "Another time, when he was still single, he and I had dates. His dame was the best. You know, this way, that way. She had it all. Well sir, I made up my mind to have her and have her I did. When he and I went to the can, I told him something about his woman that queered him on her. And he went for mine even though she was as ugly as a mud fence." Blacktail laughed again. "So, I had my picks."

"Here we are," Pier snapped, hauling up Queen and Daise before a boardinghouse and doubling them into a dance of stiff mincing steps. The wheels slowed and the spokes appeared. The mud ceased to fly. "Get out."

Blacktail climbed down stiffly, brushed his Prince Albert, threw a wily glance at Pier. "You're getting married today?"

"Wal, maybe."

"Uh-huh. Thought so. I'll bet a buck that inside of a year she'll hate you."

"Oh?"

"Yeh. You and your Frisian-Holstein bulls. Too much in a hurry." Shrugging, Blacktail turned and went up the walk.

A ragged woman came out of the unpainted house with a broom, looked at Blacktail, turned her back on him. With a deft sweep of his hand, Blacktail thwacked her, goosed her. She yelled, turned. She drew up her hackles. To Pier, she looked like an angry brood hen who was refusing to recognize a former rooster lover. Blacktail stepped neatly through the door ahead of her flying broom.

"What some people's kids won't do," Pier murmured to himself as he fitted the blanket over his knees again. "An' his father an earl."

He released the lines. Instantly the tense horses sprang down Starum's short main street. He passed an orange-and-black depot, rattled over the tracks of a railroad spur that came west from Rock Falls, went past a garage that just two years ago had been a livery stable. He waved to fat and red-faced Herman Brackx standing before his Beer & Billiard. He drove past a low building and mentally noted its various shops: produce, harness, hardware. The old blacksmith shop now housed an implement shop. A small post office had been built onto the false-fronted Starum Mercantile. He waved to skinny banker Chauncey MacIntosh standing before the Starum Bank. He wondered, as he passed the weather-browned tower above the town hall, if any of the bells were cracked again. Last year, after the winter's frost, the town council had had to buy two.

He turned north at the end of the block. A white church spired high over the Starum Grammar School. He swung past a few L-shaped, white frame houses.

Across Blood Run Creek on a high knoll spread a graveyard potted with red quartzite stones. Pier reflected that the red markers, and the village and township names, were the only things of permanence the emigrant Free Frisians had given the territory. Their wooden buildings were as passing as the days of God.

He sighed as he remembered the old Frisians, dead now in their graves, their children scattered and mingled among the many peoples

of the States. Besides Âlde Romke and Ma Lysbeth, only Âlde Folkwâlda, an aged truck gardener and the grandfather of Kaia, were left of the colony of Frisians that had taken root in 1869 on the northwest prairies of Iowa.

Blacktail came back to mind. To him Blacktail was associated with the Âlde Han, the half fool, half demon that Âlde Romke often talked about. The Âlde Han, a mythical Old Hired Hand, was a scapegoat upon whose back Âlde Romke unloaded his hard luck. If the cows got out during the night, it was the Âlde Han who had absent-mindedly forgotten to shut the gate. If the water tank ran over, it was the Âlde Han who had forgotten to brake the mill. And sometimes, when drought or hail or lightning hit, that too was the Âlde Han, smashing things with a devilish wink.

Pier filled and lighted his curve-stem, Sunday pipe. He puffed. He savored the sweet tobacco to rid himself of a bad taste.

Approaching the Blood Run Creek bridge, he drew on the lines. Queen and Daise lifted quick ears, one forward, one back, both forward, both back. In a moment their hoofs crackled on the loose floorboards of the old wooden structure. The wheels trundled loudly for a second. Then the mud began to sprettle again, the horses' ears settled, the hoofs dug in. The horses turned west onto the main highway that ran from Rock Falls, Iowa, to Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

He puffed on his pipe. He wondered how Âlde Romke and Ma Lysbeth were getting along with Nertha and her widower father, Old Dad Roel Andringa. They had gone ahead a few days early to complete the wedding arrangements. "Besides," Ma Lysbeth had said in her tall imperious way, "we want to see if she and her father are of the right kind. One way of knowing is to watch them living in their home."

Pier sighed. Both Âlde Romke and Ma Lysbeth had too proud an opinion of their dear son. He had never been able to find a girl to suit them. Thank God he had had enough guts to hang onto Nertha, had become stubborn, had insisted on marrying her.

Curiously enough, his stubborn mule-headed attachment for Nertha had healed up an old schism in the family. Gone was the deep trouble that had been festering between Âlde Romke and Ma Lysbeth.

That schism, Pier remembered, went back to their first years in

America. They had dreamed, worked, slaved. But no children came. Gradually Ma Lysbeth had come to hate the barren, empty country. And she was forty-three and Alde Romke forty-eight when, at last, miraculously, the same year that the land produced a bumper crop, she had suddenly conceived and borne a son. Up to that time Âlde Romke had gone around among his male friends with a hurt, bewildered air. But when the son and the bumper came, he immediately became a fanatical sire. He likened himself to Abraham, his wife to Sarah. He was almost tempted to name his son Isaac. He was sure that God had at last decided to let him found the new race of Free Frisians in America, with Starum as its city.

The old man was always patterning his life after Friso's, the legendary founder of the ancient peoples living along the shores of north Holland and northwest Germany near Denmark, and on all the Frisian Islands in the North Sea. He bragged that the womb of Ma Lysbeth, now opened, would teem with offspring, that his homestead, at last broken in, would groan with the weight of golden grain. But Âlde Romke dreamed and preached and bragged in vain. The Âlde Han came and neither his woman nor his land was ever kind to him again.

Pier's pipe was empty. He clapped out the hot ashes in the palm of his hand and put the pipe away.

He looked up. It wasn't going to rain after all. A sliver of blue clearing began to show in the southwest.

He pushed his somber thoughts aside. Everything would turn out all right. Father and Mother were sure to find Nertha a good woman, her family thrifty and decent. Alde Romke in particular was certain to like Nertha, since she was as tall as Ma Lysbeth, and was a green-eyed, blond half-Frisian. Yes, she would make a fine mate. She would bear children easily. Many of them.

Pier glanced at the creek on his left. Though the ice had already boomed out of the Big Sioux, this stream was still tight with it. A film of water, which had trickled down the thawing hills during the night, lay lightly over the gray ice. The water was sludgy with crystallized webs of night frost.

The creek opened up into a wide slough of dead bluejoint grass. The dead grass recalled to Pier that he had once tied up twists of cord grass for fuel. That was the winter when he and Âlde Romke had trekked to Blue Wing, Minnesota, for supplies, and had biv-

ouacked on the open plains under a crisp fall night. He had been a boy then and full of love for his garrulous, quick-tempered father.

Pier's mind drifted on, ruminating. He nodded to himself. Yes, it was too bad about Âlde Romke. Though he always put a lot of thought into his work, it did not prosper.

Most foolish had been Âlde Romke's insistence that he could teach Pier to read and write after the chores were done in the evening. The boy Pier was not going to be contaminated by the worldly Americans. And Pier had been willing. But after a day's work in the field, Pier's mind bucked. Filled with heavy logs of fatigue, with fogs of sleep, it caught but few hints of the revelation locked up in the written word. Besides, Pier had trouble relating the Frisian spelling to the spoken frontier American. There were some resemblances in sound, and a few in script, as the Frisian was related to the ancient Saxon and Angle dialects, but there were not enough to form rememberable threads. Thus Pier never learned to read or write. Luckily Pier's ear was good, and his tongue, trained in Frisian phonetics, mouthed excellent American. From Âlde Romke's entire experiment Pier learned only one thing: to figure with numbers.

Pier looked up from his reveries. The sky directly above was clearing now too. A blue flower had opened above him. The still-gray landscape and the dark muddy road became bright with sunshine.

Blood Run Creek curved away from him. He left it far behind.

The highway rose slowly on a massive swell in the land. Round sloping hills of glacier till lay to the west. Through them the Big Sioux cut its twisting way. Beyond the river, like a distant shore line, rough knolls topped an enormous lift of land.

To the southwest, on a terrace overlooking the confluence of Blood Run Creek and the Big Sioux, and facing the Hills of the Lord, lay a village of mounds. They had been built by an unknown, prehistoric race. At least so said County Agent Pederson, or the Old Dreamer, as Pier called him. And Pier believed him. Pier had often found flints, hide scrapers, arrowheads, hammerstones, grindstones, bits of charcoal. Every time he thought of these strange bults in the land, breaking out of it like wild boils, Pier was stirred. There was a past here that smoked with savage campfires, with terror and sacrifice. Through the Old Dreamer's eyes he pictured the land as it might have been: small rabbits darting past lumbering buffaloes, Indian battles quick with arrow and tomahawk.

He came to a crossroad. He turned the horses north to take the road to Dell Valley, sixteen miles away.

A few miles away, at the very northwest tip of Iowa, rose a confusion of hills covered with clumps of scrub oak, wild plum, wild grapes, and prickly ash. The climbing bittersweet, smooth sumac, and sweet sheepberry grew thickly in the hollows. The Indians called it the Gitchie Manitou land, the land of the Great Spirit.

"Funny," Pier muttered as he snapped the lines over the backs of the bays, "funny. The old man liked this country right from the start. He liked the idee of the ghosts and spirits, I guess." Pier nodded. "Maybe he liked this God's Country messed up by an Alde Han because it reminded him of the Old Country. Yep, that must a been it. It was It Alde I in all over again, full a witches an' segueners an' flyin' hexes." Pier nodded to himself again. "That's what livin' on a land does to it. The Indians here, the Frisians there."

Pier turned away from the brooding hills. He himself preferred the prairie lying to the east. He looked at it. He whistled. Once again it reminded him of an ocean. It rolled away in slow gigantic waves, broadly undulating, with vast troughs running through them from north to south, as if only yesterday a storm had raged on it, and only now it was settling, calming, waves sliding into scooped-out dells, and smooth round-top hummocks replacing gray-edged slapping crests.

Over all of it, riding the undulations like anchored convoys, floated separate farmyards: a red barn, a white frame house, a fading gray cattle shed, weathered outbuildings, and a budding windbreak grove of ash and maple and willow. Some farms rode the seas within call of each other; some almost out of sight.

He loved the land. The prairie seas, the sloping surfaces, caught his masculine eye. The vast earth was a wonderful giant woman. Her massive curves stirred the timeless bull in him.

He could not understand why Ma Lysbeth had come to hate it. He hoped Nertha would never share the feeling.

He drove on, nearing the border. His buggy was a boat. It was splitting a tranquil sea.

Every two miles he passed a white frame country schoolhouse. Set in the middle of an acre, on a road corner, with two privies and a woodshed, all white, it stood usually alone, with no trees, no brush near it. The yard was fenced in, and virgin prairie grass and wild

roses and buffalo beans grew in it. Some schoolyards had teeter-totters. A dull red brick chimney poked up from one end of the schoolhouses; a pair of wide doors opened on the other.

The road became hard. Red pebbles flecked its surface. Red gravel rimmed pools of water. A field to the left was bare of growth. A small way on, the first outcroppings of a Sioux quartzite exposure, red rock, hove into view.

Toward him, down the road, came a Model T Ford sedan. It popped noisily; and swayed back and forth on its wheels like a topheavy camel.

The trotters reared, and started for the ditch. Pier braced his legs against the dashboard, hauled back on the lines. "Whoa, you devils! Whoa!" His biceps swelled tight inside his coat sleeves. With a heave, he brought the horses to a stop. They stood uneasily, sometimes rearing a little.

The car stopped too, the motor chugging into silence. A head popped out of the window.

Pier recognized him. It was the Old Dreamer. "Think of the devil and he's bound to appear," Pier thought to himself. Aloud he called, "Hi, neighbor."

"Hello. Well, if this ain't luck. I was checking up on some weeds back there and then I was coming over to see you, Pier. Good thing I got an early start this morning or I'd've missed you."

"Oh?"

"Yeh. And I'm sorry I scared your bays." Pederson's quiet, gray eyes seemed to take in every detail of Pier's equipage.

"Oh, that's all right. There's something wrong with a horse if it ain't got pep."

Pederson nodded. He got out of the car. He was short, and almost fifty. He wore a tan cap, tan trousers, a blue shirt, a black bow tie, and a tan buckskin jacket.

Pier said, glancing at the sky, "Nice day, ain't it?"

"That it is." Pederson stepped cautiously toward the nervous horses, his hand outstretched. In the palm of it lay a cube of sugar. "Nice boy, here, boy, here." Pederson's voice was persuasive. And grave. Queen reared again but Daise lifted an inquiring nostril. She took the sugar. Pederson petted her. "You got a nice set of horses there, Pier. Nice. Yessir. And you curry 'em too." Pederson petted Daise again.

Pier said, "I see you got a way with the horses."

"A little."

"First time I ever see a stranger get that close to Daise."

Pederson smiled. "Well, in my work, I make it my business to get acquainted with the horses and dogs. If a farmer is in the field, I got to get by the horses. If he's on the yard, I got to get by the dog."

Pier raised a brow. That made sense. The Old Dreamer wasn't a fool.

"Yes, Frixen, if it was only horses I needed to win over, my work'd be a snap. But it's men I've got to convince, and that ain't hay. For some reason or other, men just won't take free advice. They're suspicious of sugar. It's got to be expensive before they'll lift an ear." Pederson ran his hand over Daise's back, took a step toward Pier, put his foot up on a spoke of the front wheel, looked up, cocking an owlish eye.

Pier cleared his throat. He knew the remark was meant for him. He had once laughed in Pederson's face about his funny farming theories. "I still say, a farmer should farm according to his own idees. Too many of them high monkey-monk idees don't get y'u nowhere."

The Old Dreamer's face clouded. "Pier, you don't understand. I'm not talking dreams. I'm talking brass-tack fact. Really, Pier. I don't give a continental about fancy ways. Really. I want you to make a living. What I tell you about plowing, going with the slope of the land, about mulcting, that's fact. Hard-iron fact. Proven by the ages."

"Talk is cheap."

Pederson reddened. "Yes, that it is. And yet, Pier, I'm telling you the truth. Remember, I'm not like most of your turtle-backed county agents. I read."

"Huh."

"Pier, let me ask you. Have you ever met any other county agents besides me?"

"Wal, no I ain't."

"Huh. You missed something. Why, they're worse than Indian medicine men. They know nothing about the physics of the soil, about chemistry, about soil fact. They don't keep up on progress. They're against co-operatives, against farmers' unions, against anything and everything that spells happy community life for the farmer. They're parasites."

"Wal, I wouldn't know about that. But just the same, I——"

Pederson interrupted. "Pier, I know what you fellows call me. The Old Dreamer. Well, in a way, that's a compliment. And I take it as such. I don't mind. You can't hurt a man who really knows something. Who knows it because he loves it. Who's taken to the land like most men take to religion, or to a sweet wife. Pier, I have no church but this land. I have no woman but this soil. And why? Well, that's a long story. Sometime I'll tell you about it. Meantime, just let me say that I've looked into the land, made a long, day-after-day study of her, and I've fell in love with her. I like the way the country smells and feels." Pederson reached down and grabbed up a handful of earth from the shoulder of the road, crumbled it in his hand, weighed it. "Pier, did you know that this soil here, this right here, is different from the land across the Big Sioux toward Sioux Falls? Different from the land across the line in Minnesota, say, near Pipestone?"

"No." Pier took out his curve-stem, Sunday pipe. He swore to himself under his breath. He had let the Old Dreamer get started again and now was in for it. He filled the pipe and lighted it.

"Well, it is. Look, I'll tell you something. A couple of four, five thousand years ago, maybe a little longer, glaciers five miles high with boulders and stones for teeth chewed up this country like it was pie. Whopping tides of dirt came shuddering through the land. Then a hot sun came, and the glaciers melted. It dropped heaps of mud and till and gravel and drift, everywhere."

"Uh-huh."

Pederson lighted a pipe too. It was a corncob, and it was singed at the edges to a black brown. "Yessir. Four times the glacier came down here, reaching out giant arms over South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa. But only the first two touched right here. And that's what makes it different."

Pier nodded, listening, his eyes closing. He found it difficult to follow the Old Dreamer's spinning. It was a lot of fool talk, as far as he was concerned, and the land was good enough without it.

Pederson ran on. While the last two glaciers were troubling the country around, northwest Iowa was being swept by long veiling gray-brown and red-brown and yellow winds from the southwest. Twenty mile and thirty-mile dunes ridged the land. Gentle knolls and hummocks arose. Seeds blew in. Fowl and minute creatures

devoured fruit and dropped seeds. The soft new land lay untouched by man. The wind and the rain and the sun played over it. Grasses grew lush, spread thick webby beds of humus. Prairie flowers bloomed. And in the draws, moonseed and burning bushes grew. The red haw, the black walnut, the heart-leaved willow flourished.

Pederson talked about the red pebbles lying on the road. Pier was startled to hear they were chips from one of the oldest rocks in the earth, a mother rock. In dim eternal Algonkian times ago, this mammoth upthrust of brittle, red-purple fire rock had bulged out of the center dungeons of the earth, had burst asunder gigantic tons of crushing shale and sandstone, had at last ripped apart veils of gray loess.

Pier humphed. "Wal, Pederson, all I can say is that it's a helluva thing to be farmin' on. In the summertime, it's like having your corn fried on a red-hot griddle. Me, I'll take the plain old prairie of my quarter any time."

Pederson looked up ruefully. "Pier, I'm only telling you all this so you can get acquainted with her."

"Who?"

"You're getting married to her and it's time you got acquainted with your working mate. If you don't, your marriage is heading for the rocks."

Pier laughed uneasily. "With Nertha? Ho, I'll get along with her all right. An' if she makes trouble, I'll put her in her place."

Pederson shook his head. "No, no. I mean your land. You're taking over, not?"

"Yeh, after the weddin' tonight."

"That's what I heard. And as I was saying, I was on my way over to tell you just how to keep from making your father's mistakes."

"What do you know about my pa's mistakes?"

"He plows hilltops when he shouldn't. He plows draws when he shouldn't."

"Huh."

"And overgrazes the pasture in dry years. Pier, the grass can't stand that. Never let it get too short or it'll wash out."

"An' what am I supposed to do with the cattle them years? Feed 'em peppermints to stop their bellerin'?"

"Pier, did you ever stop to think that your land was human? That it breathes and eats and sweats, and bears like a woman? That it'll even digest iron if that's all it can get to eat?"

"Say," Pier exclaimed, pointing his pipe at Pederson, his pride rising, "say, I kin take care a my own affairs."

Pederson nodded patiently. "Sure. And in another ten years your farm won't raise legumes, let alone hope." Pederson raised his arm dramatically. "Pier, at the rate you farmers are slopping away the soil, America will be a desert in a hundred years. A hundred years. And it'll be a bigger one than the Sahara in Africa is today. Sure. Just mark my words. And just like the Aztecs in Central America, you fellows, as a nation, will scatter to the four winds. You'll go out as fast as you came in."

Pier's eyes flared. His lips became grim. "Pederson, you should read your Bible more. If you did you'd know that 'of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.'"

Pederson smiled. "The Bible also says, 'seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.'"

"Oh."

"Pier, I'm your friend. Your land doctor. A doctor who never charges for his prescriptions."

"Land doctor, huh. Let me tell you something, Pederson. And then I got to be on. If all the farmers here'bouts would farm their land clean like me, if they'd clean their seed in the spring, if they'd cultivate on time, if they would plow neat and straight, the land would stay as sweet as it's always been. It's been careless farmers like Ol' Spit Triggs, and loafers, who've ruined it. They've brung in dirty seed. Some a them fellers has never used their head. Imagine, Ol' Spit Triggs tried to raise hemp on this here land. And you know what happened. It turned to a weed."

"Pier, I'm not talking about weeds. I'm talking about something bigger."

"Wal, I don't get you then."

"Pier, this land's got a history, a story. It means something. It stands for something. If you'll only stop to understand it, you'll have a good life with it. It don't pay to marry a woman blind, does it?"

"Pederson, I guess that's my own business, marrying. Good day."

Pederson said nothing. He broke a clod of weed-lined mud from the buggy wheel. And shrugged and turned away.

Pier put his pipe in his pocket and giddapped the horses and whirled down the road.

Pier drove out of northwest Iowa and crossed into the South Dakota point. Four miles east, the Minnesota line came down from the north.

The land began to dry beneath the warming sun. The road became flaked with dry curdles of earth. The southwest wind whipped it. The spinning wheels and kicking hoofs no longer threw up spottles of mud. Dirt balls dried in the blowing tails of the horses. Soon little swirls of dust rose briefly beneath the horses' sideswiping feet.

He topped a long low hill, saw the scattered village of Two-bits lying on a hummock a mile to the west.

He drove on. The town of Sometimes came up close to his right. Three miles to his left the hamlet of Squaw Tit appeared. Beyond, peering at him like a surprised gopher, pricked a Sioux Falls church spire.

The argument he had with the Old Dreamer faded from his mind. He began to whistle.

He sang. He tied the lines on the dashboard. He blew his mouth organ. The spokes of the wheels whined. The steel rims crackled on the loose red gravel.

It was spring. A great year lay ahead. Times were back to normal. A bumper was on the way.

It was past noon when he stopped Queen and Daise to rest on the crest of a haystack hill. Queen, who had a bad wind, puffed heavily, standing with legs apart and head down. Sweat darkened her bay into a deep red.

Pier threw aside the yellow duster. He opened a pack of sandwiches. He stretched on the buggy seat, slowly munching bread and musing to himself.

Even the horses, he noticed, had different souls. Outwardly the pair of bays seemed perfectly matched. Only their ears and eyes were odd. Daise had short, quick ears, and eyes as large as shiny chestnuts. Queen had long ears and nervous rolling eyes. Though Daise had no inclination to run away, she was tricky. She liked to nip his arm, liked to chase the other horses away from the water trough when she was at it, liked to reach through the fence for

forbidden grain. But Queen jumped like a kangaroo at the least sound, always strained against the lines with feverish terror, was quick to start a stampede with a wild snort.

Dreaming, Pier happened to glance at his patent-leather shoes. A film of dust had hidden the gloss of the black toes. He brushed them. Puffs flew up beneath his vigorous slapping. He straightened the crease over his knees, worried his tie up close to his stiff white collar. He brushed crumbs from the seat. He crumpled the empty bag. Then, feeling clean and neat, he resumed his musing.

When Queen began to breathe evenly again, Pier flourished the lines. The horses started up. They ran quietly, with steady pelting beats. Puffs of dust burst from their fleeing, quarter-moon hoofs.

He entered the Coteau des Prairies south of Dell Valley. The land began to tumble and lift and fall around him. He caught occasional glimpses of the tree-fringed Split Rock River wriggling along on his left. He followed it northward. It gushed out of the Palisades, churning through red and purple-black rocks.

Once more he was stirred by the strange, troubled land. It was hardly a wonder that the Indians had had a wholesome respect for the rocks and rivers of Siouxland. Just north of Dell Valley yawned Devil's Gulch, a fearsome wrinkled slash, a wound which opened up the red rock fleshes of the earth to the sun. Through it the Split Rock spilled its waters. Across the Minnesota border to the east growled the Winnewissa Falls, splashing over green and purple rocks, and watering ash and scrub-oak growths. And near Pipestone lay a field of soft rock resembling frozen blood. From it the Indians carved their long peace pipes.

The whirling steel-rimmed wheels rattled down the hill. Horse and vehicle pounced on the culvert in the valley. The hollow boomed. Stones sprettled the draw. Then another hill sent its heavy shouldering wave against them.

Dell Valley appeared below.

He straightened. He fumbled his tie again.

He glanced at his silver watch. It was two o'clock. He smiled to himself. Here he was, and the horses strong.

He wondered if Nertha would wear white at the wedding. He speculated on what she would say.

He trembled. He twisted nervously in his seat. He sweated. What was a woman anyway? And what did a man do after he was alone

with one of them, and no one to spy on their mating, not even the Lord God to make them shiver with fear for sinning together? Would it feel right to touch her after the magic words had been spoken? When a man and a woman undressed before each other for the first time, did they act like bull and heifer? Or like domeny and angel?

He laughed wildly. He remembered the time a month ago when he had suddenly crushed Nertha in his arms, had striven to reach under her dress. He had touched welling flesh. Snorting, blowing, he had wrestled with her until she had scratched him and whispered hoarsely in his ear, "Pier! Pier! Wait! Not now! Please. Not now. Wait until we're married. Then, anything you want."

He shouted. The time had come. The wedding day had come.

He slapped the lines over the horses. He sang:

"Run, horse, run,
Puff, horse, puff,
Whip your glossy tail,
Kick your glassy hoof.
Jump the wire fence,
Tear my Sunday pants."

He drove around the west side of town to avoid the loiterers on the street. He would get enough attention from them after the wedding when they came to shivaree. He drove down a quiet lane north of town, in sight of Devil's Gulch. He took out his mouth organ and began to play again.

He could see her in his mind. She would come out, and look west, listening to his serenade. She would come down the steps to open the gate and would stand waiting for him outside the white picket fence.

He swung the horses around a corner and approached her house. He saw the new swing seat, the circle of flowers at the gate, the neatly painted privy in the back yard.

He blinked his eyes. His mouth fell open. Nertha was nowhere in sight. There were no people on the yard, no friends, no relatives, no buggies, no horses tied to the hitching post.

He drove up and leaped out. He fastened Queen and Daise to the hitching post. He vaulted the picket fence. He hurried up the red stone path to the front door.

The door opened. Nertha's father, Roel Andringa, appeared. White shirt on, his Sunday vest unbuttoned, he stood gaunt on the steps. He wiped his brow with his hand.

"What's louse here?" Pier asked.

Old Dad Roel's fingers trembled. "Pier, my boy, I wish I didn't have to tell you."

"Talk up."

"Son, I guess we didn't suit your father and mother."

"You mean, they left?"

Old Dad Roel winked gentle eyes. He combed his gray hair. "Yes, my boy."

"They didn't like her?"

"I guess not."

"Judas Priest!"

"Now, now, son. Don't get excited." Old Dad Roel shook his thin bony head.

"Where's she?"

"She left the house about an hour ago."

"Where to?"

"I dunno, son. She didn't say. I told her you would——"

"What'd she say?"

"She said nothin'."

"Nothin'?"

"No."

For a second Pier stood numbed. He picked at a sliver in the white porch post. "What hit the old people? What was the matter?"

"I dunno."

"Where'd they go?"

"They went to the Red Rock Hotel. Downtown."

"Judas t'Priest."

"I'm sorry, my boy."

"Sorry, hell. I'll fix that. When Nertha comes back, tell her to go on as planned. Tell her I'll fix it up. Tell her to get the grub an' such ready. Friends. We'll have a weddin' supper yit." He swallowed. He glanced up at Old Dad Roel. "I'll have them both here if I have to drag 'em in by the neck, the fools."

He ran along the gravel street. He bounded down the sidewalk as he neared the Red Rock Hotel. Women in long skirts and sur-

rounded by broods of children looked at him curiously. Wrath geysered in him.

He swore. He couldn't let the old folks ruin something that had begun so joyously a year ago. Vividly he remembered the beginning of it. One Sunday, on a whim, restless, he had gone to the Sometimes church. Domeny Beckstrom, Old White Wings, who preached one Sunday in Starum, the next in Dell Valley, was too pompous and obscure for him. To the Sometimes church had gone the Andringas, for the same reason. And somehow, after the service, Old Dad Roel and Pier had fallen into a talk—which had led naturally to Nertha. She had invited him over for supper. Afterward, she got him to play his mouth organ.

He rammed through the front door of the old red stone two-story hotel.

The proprietor came up, eyes wide.

"My folks stayin' here?"

"Who?"

"My folks. The Frixens."

"Why, yeh. There's a couple here by that name. Upstairs."

"What room?"

"Number 3. Want me to take you up?"

"No, I kin find it."

"But——"

Pier ran up three steps at a time. He ran along the hall, glancing at the numbers, his hard heels clicking on the bare floor. He found 3 halfway down the hall. He entered without knocking.

Alde Romke jumped up like a flushed redheaded pheasant. His pipe fell from his red toothless gums. His light blue eyes whitened with surprise. Ma Lysbeth was sitting on the bed with her back toward him. A gray shawl lay over her shoulders. She turned a tear-stained face toward him.

"Ae! dou alde grize bolle, so here you are, huh?" Pier bellowed at his father, unthinkingly dropping into his mother tongue.

Alde Romke waved a weak hand. "Ae. I see you've come."

"You damn well right I've come, you old fool."

"Nou, nou, breinroer, bidimje."

"Breinroer? Who wouldn't have a roar in his brain with a pair a old skates like you two mussin' up his life? An' I'm not bedimming until you two birds explain a thing or two."

Ma Lysbeth got slowly to her feet, her joints creaking, her spare body bending at the hips like a broken board. She rubbed a hand over her windbelly. She stepped beside Âlde Romke, towering over him. She stood stiff, wordless. Like Nertha she had slender legs and wide hips. She had solemn ways. But unlike Nertha she still wore the clothes of It Âlde Làn. An old Frisian headdress,, a bonnet caught under a gold casque, hid her bobbed blond-gray hair. The old gold headpiece tied her solidly back to the ancient days when the best Frisian women cut off their locks and wore gold bands, the family fortune, over their heads to discourage sadistic menfolk from dragging them through the dirt by the hair.

Pier recognized her pose as an attack. He pounced on it. "Wal, an' what've you got to say?"

"Soan, is that a way to greet your âlden?"

"Âlden. Y'u ain't my âlden no more. Not after what you did to my Nertha."

"Well, soan," began Âlde Romke, his hand playing in his arrow-sharp red-gray beard, "we thought it best——"

"You thought it best. You, a failure at everything you've tried."

Âlde Romke drew his cricket body up full beside tall Ma Lysbeth. "I'm your pa, soan, an' I deman' respect."

"Horse collar. You've never earned my respect." He turned savagely on Ma Lysbeth. "Ma, ye're at the bottom of this. You looked for faults an' you found them. What's wrong with Nertha? She got hair on her chest? Or a spavin in her behind?"

Ma Lysbeth's eyes burned whitely in their large, shadowed sockets. She clutched Âlde Romke's arm.

Alde Romke muttered weakly, "Soan, dy faem is net goed genòch."

"Not good enough? What do you want, Wodan's wife? A Freya for me?"

"Soan, she is not 'n oprjochte Fries."

[illegible] He rolled his fists. He pushed against Âlde Romke, [illegible] over him. "What about Old Dad Roel? Ain't he a true Frisian?"

"Sure, sure. But her dead mother, she wasn't."

"Oh, for godsakes. I suppose she was a Jersey."

"She was a Norwegian."

"Wal, what's the hell wrong with that?"

"Ae, soan, don't you remember? In It Âlde Lân we used to sing:

> *'Frije Friezen, hâld goed wacht tsjin 't noarderlân,*
> *Hwant út dy grime hern komt kwea ús oan.'"*

"Oh, Judas Priest."

"Soan, remember, you've got the name of Pier. It is a great name. A great man once had it. A man as great as the greatest of the Frisian princes."

"Oh, fer godsakes, you an' yer damned nonsense about the Old Country. An' all them legends about Greate Pier. Grow up. We're in Free America now. We're Americans. We got presidents in this country, not princes. An' talk American. I'm getting tired a yer always spielin' off that Old Country lingo."

Âlde Romke fumbled with his pipe. He broke loose from Ma Lysbeth's grasp and got out his silver tobacco box. He said, with averted eyes, "Soan, I can already see that life's going to be hard on you. I predict terrible things for you."

"Pa," Pier said suddenly, "if you was to tell me the truth, the real truth, you'd say you'd like Nertha, wouldn't you?"

"Well . . ."

"You'd like her, wouldn't you? Personally?"

"Well, yeh. Sure. She's all right. She's got the build——"

"I thought so." Pier turned on Ma Lysbeth. He caught a faint whiff of eau de cologne. "Ma, it's you who's queered me up, ain't it? Ye're the one who's stoked up a fire in the old man, ain't you?"

She moved. Her lips stirred. "Soan, she'll be no good to you."

"Why not?"

"She ain't made for childbirth and such other wife doings."

"She ain't?"

"No."

"Huh, she'll take to it better than you did."

"Wo'dammit," swore the old man. "Soan, I deman' that you show your mother respect."

Pier made up his mind. "Pa. Ma. I'll give you two birds just two minutes to get over to the Andringa house. Get over there cricket-quick. Or, so help me God, I'll never talk to you again as long as I live."

Pier turned on his heels, stalked out of the room.

. 2 .

A bristling northwest wind burned his cheeks to a high red. It filmed his eyes with tears. His nose dripped. The chilling blast stung his teeth to the roots. By ten o'clock Pier was so chilled he decided to tie up the horses and get a warm cup of coffee.

He looked to the east across the big fifty. Half of the old cornstalks were neatly disked and trampled into the earth. The criss-crossing, catercorner rows were edging slowly over the field.

Pier slapped his arms around his chest. He ran through the grove of ash and maple. His leg bones stung each time he hit the hard earth. His legs felt wooden. He thought it odd that it should be so cold on April Fool's Day. He pulled his blue woolen cap down over his forehead. He snuggled inside his sheepskin.

As he came past the cornerib he was startled to see smoke rising into the gray sky from the woodshed chimney. Wondering, he burst open the door. He found Nertha leaning disconsolately over an upright dasher churn. In her hands was the beater.

"Hey, what's louse here?"

She looked up. She tried to brighten, shake tears from her cheek. "Nuthin'."

Pier's heart beat quickly. Gleaming skin, silver hair, she was almost the picture of a young Ma Lysbeth. An urge to imprison her long, muscular body in his arms stirred him. "What's up, Nertha?"

"Oh, nuthin'."

"Why ain't you churnin' in the kitchen where it's warm?"

"No room. Your mother's workin' in there."

"Uh-huh. So you an' Ma Lysbeth're fightin' again, huh?"

"Well . . ."

"Wal, I expected it. Yer movin' them upstairs into my old room an' us down in their old room off the livin' room wasn't exactly the best way to win them over, girl."

She looked down, her lip troubled.

Pier sighed. He set up a stubby log and sat down. He took her hand. "Tell. What's wrong now?"

"Oh, I . . . Pier, I hate to say this, but I can't stand her."

"Land alive, woman, she's your mother as well as mine now."

"I know. But I'll never get along with her."

"Why not?"

"Well, remember when I told you yesterday that I didn't think it very nice of you and Ålde Romke to talk about bulls an' such at the table? That there was a time and place for everything?"

Pier nodded.

"Well, just the minute you two got out of the house, she told me she didn't care for my high-toned ideas."

Pier snorted.

"An', Pier, you know it's not that. I just want things decent."

"Uh-huh."

"An' then this morning she started in on something else. She's mad because I serve coffee for breakfast instead a tea, like you've always been used to having."

Pier looked up. "Wal, Nertha, that's another place where ye've touched both Pa and Ma on a touchy spot. Tea."

"Well, I don't care. If I'm gonna serve the meals, they're gonna be set my way. Besides I'm only changing the morning drink. Making it fifty-fifty."

Pier smiled inwardly. He liked her spirit. "Now look here, Nertha. You mustn't say no to everything Ma tells you. She must a knowed something to have lived this long, you know."

Nertha sighed. Her feet stirred beneath her long green dress.

"Aw, come now, girl. Come to your senses."

"An' then she bawls me out because I buy my soap instead a makin' it out a lye and fats."

"Wal, now——"

"An' then she expects me to make my own lye out a hardwood ashes. Like they did in pioneer days. Imagine."

"Wal, tell her to go to grass. Tell her to mind her own knittin'."

"Your own mother?"

"Sure. If she don't behave, she's got it comin'. She ain't no better than anybody else."

"An' then she wants me to make my own brooms. An' she wants me to save scraps. Why, the house's so full a junk I kin hardly turn around in it."

"Wal, she can't help that. She learnt savin' in the hard days. Before we were born even."

"But it makes the house stink so. Why, it smells like a sepulchre in there."

Pier laughed. "That's probably my socks."

Nertha flashed angry green eyes at him.

"Wal, take it easy, girl. Ma Lysbeth is getting old. Pretty soon she'll be takin' her shoes off for the last time. When that time comes, then you kin run the house to suit yerself."

Nertha shook her head as if she hadn't heard. "I don't understand her at all. Not at all. She's so funny. Why, she sometimes smokes a clay pipe."

"Yeh, wal, that's——"

"An' she makes 'em herself."

Pier drew a corncob pipe from his clothes and nervously began to fill it. Nertha was hitting too close.

"She's just like them Old Country spooks. Them segueners Âlde Romke is always mumblin' about."

"Come now. That's flapdoodle an' you know it." The cozy woodshed warmed him. His wind-weathered face began to burn.

"An then she just sits there. Lookin'. Rockin'."

"Say, I'm beginning to see you don't like my folks."

"Oh, it isn't that. It's . . . I just can't stand her staring there. Quiet. Not sayin' a word."

Pier tried to laugh it off. "You know what the feller says, 'Still waters break hills.'"

"Sure, an' she'll break me too."

Pier puffed on his pipe. The fire in it burned with a noise like fat crackling in a frying pan.

He looked through the door and happened to catch sight of a tall jar standing inside the north kitchen window. "Say, is Ma Lysbeth bakin' bread?"

"Yes," Nertha muttered, looking at the floor again.

"I thought you were gonna do that from now on."

"I was. But she didn't like the way I mixed the dough. Said I put in too much yeast. Said I wasted the yeast."

"By the way, did she give you that jar a yeast to use?" He pointed.

"Wasn't I supposed to have it?" she countered.

"Why, I dunno. You see . . . why, woman, do you know what that means, her givin' it to you?"

"No, I don't. An' I don't care to know either."

"Why, it means . . . why, that's wonderful. She must've decided to let you take over after all."

Nertha sniffed.

"No. Really. Look, Nertha. In our family that jar a yeast goes with the head woman."

"Huh."

"Aw, Nertha, I'll bet a buck this trouble's all in yer head."

Nertha began to stir the beater.

"Really, girl. That jar a yeast's been handed down for hundreds a years. It goes back to Adam almost."

"I thought you didn't care for them Old Country fables."

"Wal, I don't. But if the old folks are willin' to hand some a that good stuff on to us, why, I ain't refusin' it."

Nertha hid her face.

"Come now, get to yer churnin', girl. The cream'll sour if you don't. C'mon, everything will be all right. Here. I'll help you." He started to pump the beater. "C'mon. An' sing with me. It's time you learned the song anyway." He beat vigorously, and sang:

"Churning, cheesing, churning, dlonk.
Butter in the churning, glonk.

"Girl went out to milk the cow,
Couldn't jump the creek nohow.

"Pier came by and saw her there,
Saw it was his Nertha fair.

"Said he t'her, 'Try leapin' o'er.'
Said he t'her, 'Try springin' o'er.'

"Cried she t'him, 'The houn's'll bite.'
Cried she t'him, 'The cats'll fight.'

"Churning, cheesing, churning, dlonk.
Butter in the churning, glonk.

"Then he kissed her on the cheek,
Then he clapt her on the seat.
One, n'two, n'three, n'four.
And she sprang and leapt it o'er.

"Bumps a cupful from each cow.
Bumps and sweats and wipes her brow,
Fills the pail full,
Fills the tank full,
Finds she churned the whole house full!
Dlonk!"

Nertha laughed. She sang with him.

· 3 ·

For a time all four people in Pier's household managed to get along. By the end of the first week in May, Pier began to hope that he might have a happy family. Each had seemingly accepted a routine of work: Ma Lysbeth dusting the rooms and washing the milkware, Nertha cooking the meals, Alde Romke choring on the yard, and Pier rooting around in his fields.

The arrangement worked so well that Pier saw his way clear to start planting his corn a week ahead of his neighors. Not even bow-legged Red Joe Faber a mile to the east, nor the three hard-working Grimovich brothers across the road to the south, had been able to keep up with him.

The morning sunlight glinted on the prairie sward. Despite a dry April, oat sprouts veiled the big fifty to the east with a faintly quivering green. Dew sparkles gleamed in the pasture bluegrass west of the grove. Even Red Bluff stirred with yellow shoots. And the plowed little fifty north of the house, where Pier was planting corn, spread purply gray.

The two gray horses, Maid and Mell, followed a line that had been cut by a long-poled marker the previous round. They were heavy horses, and their feet sluffed through the gray powdery soil. They had an unerring sense of direction.

The long trip wire that lay across the field twanged each time one of its knobs came through the V-shaped tripper. *Click. Click. Click.* Each time a knob flicked past, the tripper simultaneously dumped three to five kernels out of a pair of corn boxes. Always the kernels dropped exactly forty inches beyond the last dumping. The kernels fell into a trench cut by a steel nose, were covered by a

pair of big wheels (also forty inches apart) mounding dirt back into the trench. When the corn grew up, the field would be as neatly and as evenly crisscrossed as a checkerboard. This made weed killing easy. Men could get at the corn with cultivators from all sides: north and south the first time, east and west the second time, and north and south the last time.

The planter clicked steadily across the field. The beat of a song was in it. Pier hummed it, and sometimes broke into a whirring warbling whistle.

Reaching the end of the field near the grove, Pier unhooked the trip wire out of the machine, turned the horses carefully around to face the north, stopped them, got off. He stretched, and yawned, and stooped to pull up the stake anchoring the trip wire. The moment the stake came out of the ground, the taut wire tugged at him. He pulled against it, holding it, and jammed the stake into the earth for the next round.

A brilliant red-brown thrasher flashed through the grove. It landed near him just out of reach. It partially camouflaged itself against a brown bough. In a moment it began to sing derisively:

Drop it, drop it in, drop it.
Cover it, cover it up, cover it.
I'll dig it, dig it out, dig it.
I'll eat it, eat it up, eat it.

Pier laughed.

He slapped his pant legs, whipping up whiffs of dust. He straightened his cap and licked his dry lips.

It was time for the morning lunch. But, seeing neither Alde Romke nor Nertha coming toward him through the grove, he reluctantly crawled back onto the corn-planter seat and started up the horses.

He went along. He threw quick glances over the land.

The field lifted beneath him. The land waved to the eastern horizon in far two-mile flakes of undulation. Red and white farm buildings surrounded by green windbreaks speckled the countryside. A water tower rolled slowly on the edge of the earth.

He came to the north end of the little fifty. Again he turned around, reset the trip-wire stake, started up, headed south.

A pheasant exploded into the air. The horses shied. The angry cackling bird whirred away with a rushing beat of wings.

A weed caught in the trip wire. He stopped the grays to unhook it. Last year a weed had ruined his cross-check.

The red-brown thrasher followed him along the edge of the field, hiding itself in last year's weeds, poking fun of him:

Drop it, drop it in, drop it.
I'll eat it, eat it up, eat it.

He was about to swing up on his seat again, when he happened to glance toward the barnyard. He rubbed his eyes. Through the vague veils of buds in the north grove, he saw something that puzzled him. Wasn't that Âlde Romke leading the bull, Âlde Hengist, out of the cattle shed? Pier watched. Sure enough. He saw Âlde Romke lead the old boy into the barn. Mentally Pier checked off the cows. As far as he could remember none were in heat. It couldn't be that the old man had the long yearling, Princess, in mind?

Pier moved. The old man was up to something. He slapped the lines over the backs of the horses. He hurried them to the end of the field. He unhooked the planter from the trip wire, tied up the horses to a fence post.

He ran heavily. By the time he had run through the grove he found his breath tearing at his throat.

He broke into the barn just as Âlde Romke was unloosening the halter from Âlde Hengist in an empty calf pen. In a corner stood Princess, bright-eyed.

"What the hell are you up to?" Pier demanded.

Âlde Romke jerked around. His curve-stem pipe flew from his mouth. His face whitened. His pointed red-gray beard quivered. "Ae . . ."

Pier slipped quickly through an open stanchion. He wrested the halter from the old man. He leaped toward the black-and-white bull.

But the bull had picked up the scent of the eager virgin yearling in its nostrils. Âlde Hengist sniffed, roared, lowered his head, charged Pier. Pier dodged nimbly. Just as the bull rushed by, he jumped on its shoulder, slid down its neck, caught its rubbery nose with two hooking fingers. With an angry jerk Pier drew Âlde Hengist's nose to the floor. And in a flash, haltered the beast and fastened him to a stanchion.

He turned to Âlde Romke. "What the hell was you up to, mister?"

Âlde Romke shook fear from his slender frame. He crowned himself again with his fatherly pipe. "Ae, she was bullin'."

"Without askin' me?"

"Why not? Ain't I runnin' the yard?"

"Chorin', yeh. But not breedin'. That's my work." Pier puffed. He looked at the heifer. He swore. "Judas Priest, Pa, you know damned well that heifer ain't fit yit. She's only a long yearlin'." Pier's eyes became white-blue lights of fury. His red-brown brows glowered. "You said yerself that Frisian-Holstein heifers ain't to be bred until they're at least nineteen months old. What got into y'u?"

Âlde Romke gestured. "That heifer's eighteen if she's a day."

"Flapdoodle. That heifer was born on the first of December."

"Oh no. It was the first of November. I know. I marked it down the day she came in. Right here." Âlde Romke pointed to a calendar hanging beside a medicine cabinet. A very dusty picture of a fat locomotive bulging out of a Rocky Mountain tunnel adorned it.

Pier grabbed his father's arm. "Never mind. I don't need to look at the calendar. I know. I got it down in my head. That calf came the first of December."

"It's not a calf, it's a heifer."

"Calf, heifer, the main idee is this. I ain't made up my mind to breed her yit. Look, Pa, Princess is gonna be the womb of my new stock. I gotta be careful how I seed it. Get it?"

"Wo'dammit, t'hell with it then," the old man shouted. He threw his pipe into the straw; and then, apparently remembering how precious it was, snatched it up from the dirt and returned it to his mouth. He spat. Small bits of dust speckled his quivering lip and red-gray beard. "Soan—"

Pier jumped in before Âlde Romke could get started. "Pa, I'm surprised at y'u. When are you ever gonna learn? Ye're always plantin' potatoes when it's time to plant corn, an' plantin' corn when you should be makin' hay, an' makin' hay when you should be cuttin' red-ripe grain. An' now this too yet. Pa, Pa."

The old man became pale purple with fury. "Soan, I deman' respect."

Pier laughed.

"Soan, I deman' respect."

"Y'u'll get it when you got it comin'."

"Soan!"

"All right, all right. Here's a handful."

Âlde Romke snorted, and stamped around in the straw, and tried to light his pipe.

Behind them the bull moaned and slavered, and tugged at the halter.

"I deman' respect," the old man continued to mutter.

"All right, all right."

"Soan, you may know more about them new fangled do-hinky-dinky machines than I do, but I know my breeding. Know it good. Hain't I developed the best Frisian strain in this part of the country?"

"Wal . . ."

"Course, I ain't found a way a getting the cows to throw twins every time yet, but that'll come. It takes time to graft a new thing onto a breed that the Frisians ha' been working on since the time of Christ."

"Sure, I know. But——"

"An' look at the way she eyes Âlde Hengist."

"That don't mean nothing. I've seen little twelve-year-old girls look like that too. Does that mean they gotta get married?"

"Soan, I know her time better than you."

"Pa, do you want to saddle me down with another five-thousand-dollar debt?"

The old man winced. The past winter Âlde Romke had been forced to take a mortgage on the farm. It was this that had led directly to Pier's insistence that he run things.

"Pa, I hate sayin' such things, but I'm a plain-speakin' man. If we have one more year like the last one we're done."

The old man looked bitterly at the floor of the barn.

Pier scuffed in the straw. "Besides, I think I know a thing or two about breedin' myself."

"Oh do you now."

"Yeh."

"Ae, we'll see about that." The rooster-quick little man hitched up his baggy Old Country pants, sniffed, pulled on his pipe until he had sucked in his cheeks over his red toothless gums. "Now. Now tell me. When do you wean the yeanlings?"

"Calves? Five months," Pier said reluctantly. He hated catechisms.

"Huh. Yeh. Well, an' when can you turn the yeanlings outdoors?"

"Not before four months."

"Huh. So. Well——"

Pier interrupted. "Look, Pa. Ye're wastin' my time. I know what ye're gettin' at." He saw the old man open his mouth to protest and rushed on. "All right. All right. I'll tell you then. What kind a calves are we throwin' out? Them that's either all black or all white. Right?"

"Ae, but——"

"An' the cows? Feed 'em a lot of grass an' grassland hay, an' they'll get strong bones an' a long behind. An' a deep chest an' a long barrel fer a belly. An' fine wide flanks an' fine soft hair. Right?"

"Ae, but——"

"An' the bulls? Wal, just look at Âlde Hengist. He's got eyes so sharp with heifer love, they shine. An' wide loins an' chest. A big heavy barrel fer a belly. Only thing Âlde Hengist ain't got, is horns. An' that's to the good. Right?"

Âlde Romke stared. His pipe slipped a little in his lips. "Good. Perfect good. You ha' learned your lesson well. Good. Now. An' who did you learn it from?"

"You, of course. But that still don't make you boss, this year."

Âlde Romke tried to light his pipe but his fingers were too jumpy.

Pier suddenly felt sorry for the old man and he edged his voice with a little kindness. "Pa, there is one thing y'u kin do fer me, though."

"Huh?" The old man finally got his pipe going. "An' what's that?"

"Wal, tell Ma to quit layin' down the law to Nertha. My wife."

Blinking his eyes, the old man cocked his head wisely to one side, very well aware that he had about as much to say about the way his wife should behave as the moon has about where the sun should go. "Well, soan, our mem, you know how she is. Bossy by nature. You can't change that. Never. Twa kear twa is fjouwer."

"Quit talkin' that duke's mixture. Talk American."

The old man's eyes wrinkled. He swallowed, went on. "Anyway, the trouble ain't all Ma's fault. Nertha can be stubborn too."

"Sure, but——"

"You dummed right she can. The other day she took down the old proverb an' put up a new one."

"Oh that." Pier smiled to himself. She had replaced GOD IS THE HEAD OF THIS HOUSE with THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF. The first had silver lettering on red velvet, the second silver on purple. Yes, Nertha was showing herself to be a pretty nervy wife.

"Ae. An' then yesterday they had another roun'. About naming the first-born. Nertha said she wasn't going to name it Romke."

"Oh?"

"That's what she said. An', soan, that's wrong. It's always been Romke or Pier in our family. For thousands of years."

"Oh, that's a lot of flapdoodle. Look, Pa. We're in America now. An' if my wife wants to give the boy an American name, that's all right with me."

"An' the old family names, they're no good no more?"

Pier tightened. He felt he could not let go. He could not let the old man's confusions make dust out of his future. "Pa, if Nertha wants to give our first boy a name like Abraham Lincoln or Teddy Roosevelt, it's all right with me. Them's plain American names. Besides, give a kid a funny name, an' all the kids in school will pick on him."

"An' what's wrong with the names of It Âlde Lân heroes? Greate Friso? An' Tabbo? Redbad? Greate Pier? Horsa? An' Hengist who had as many wives as Solomon?"

"T'hell with 'em." Pier stepped back to stroke the bull's pulsing shoulders. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen the heifer lift her tail again.

Once more Âlde Romke smote his pipe into the straw and retrieved it with almost the same motion. "Soan, if that boy ain't named Romke, I'll cut you off."

"Aw, Pa, let's quit the fightin'. I've got work to do in the field. An' you've got chorin'. Just take the old bull back to his shed, where I had him locked up, an' we'll talk it over tonight." Pier gave the pawing bull another pat and slipped through a stanchion.

He opened the door and started across the yard.

He filled his pipe as he went. He stopped behind the trunk of a maple in the grove to light a match. Puffs of smoke flew up from cupped hands.

He threw a backward glance at the yard. And stiffened.

Out of the barn, halter rope dragging, came Âlde Hengist, chasing

Princess. The old bull leaped up, tried to imprison her between his powerful forepaws. The heifer slid from under.

And in the barn door, sucking his pipe, unconcerned, leaned Âlde Romke, a smile stirring his red-gray beard.

Pier grabbed a branch from the floor of the grove. Breaking off twigs as he ran, he came upon the bull. He clubbed it.

Âlde Hengist turned on him with a frustrated bellow. And charged.

Pier hesitated. He felt himself rooted momentarily to the ground. With an effort he collected his wits. This time the bull was coming too fast for him to think about catching it. Pier leaped to one side. Nose low, like a road grader with the blade down, the bull bored by. Passed, Pier whirled and leaped for the safety of the barn. In his haste he bumped Âlde Romke into the straw.

The bull stopped, looked around, bellowed. Seeing no enemy, it snorted, stalked Princess again. With noble dignity, with the flourish of a master, Âlde Hengist coupled with the heifer, planted his seed. The aching long yearling was bred.

· 4 ·

Pier said, as soon as Âlde Romke had gotten to his feet, "That settles it. Come with me." He tugged angrily at the leather sleeve of the old man's jerkin.

"Ae, but I couldn't help it. He broke loose from me," Âlde Romke protested, his light blue eyes rolling.

"Yeh, an' that smile broke loose from you too. C'mon to the house. We're settlin' this right now."

Pier led the way, stomping into the kitchen. Both women looked up surprised: Nertha with a rising flush, Ma Lysbeth with chilling mien.

Ma Lysbeth stood up. "What now?"

"Ma, we've all got a bone to pick together." He pointed to the armchair for Âlde Romke. "An' it ain't gonna be a fresh one either."

"Now, now, bidinje." Ma Lysbeth moved imperially toward the stove and picked up her own teapot. "Some tea?"

"Uh . . . ain't Nertha set the coffee?" Pier asked. "It's coffee time. I've been waitin' for one of y'u to bring it to the field."

Ma Lysbeth tightened.

"Besides, this ain't gonna be no polite jawin' match," Pier growled.

Âlde Romke stood up. "Soan, I deman' respect."

Ma Lysbeth pointed. "Sit del!"

Âlde Romke plopped down. He turned his favorite armchair toward the door ready to spring.

Pier reddened. He remembered that Âlde Romke was so in fear of Ma Lysbeth that he kept a change of clothing in the barn against the day of one of her rampages. "Ma, you sit down too." Pier pointed.

She remained stiffly by the stove.

Pier made a threatening step toward her.

Slowly, reluctantly, only partially cowed, she bent her body and sat down. She clasped her hands over her windbelly.

"There. Now." Pier sat down too. "Ma, I'll come to the point. I think it's best you old people retire and get yerselves a house in town. Ye're sixty-seven an' Pa's seventy-two. It's high time y'u did."

"What?"

"Yeh, that's right. You heard me."

"But why?"

"Ma, God gives some people the brain of a human being, but when he came to our pa here, he gave him the brain of a bumblebee. He don't know beans from buttons."

"Soan!"

"But it's true."

"Soan, he is your father. Respect, soan!"

"Respect, my ass. He's always bulloxin' things up. Here I am, trying my level best to make a go a things here, trying to make things hum, runnin' mysel' down to a breath an' a bone, hitchin' an' hoppin' an' runnin', figurin' an' thinkin' an' calculatin', an' then this Pa here a mine comes along to bullox the business up."

"Soan," Ma Lysbeth said severely, drawing herself up, pinching in her windbelly, "soan, I must ask you to hold your tongue."

"Ask me to hold mine? Lissen, Ma, ain't you got it through yer thick wood-head yit that I'm runnin' this place? That it's fer me to say who's to shut up?"

Âlde Romke jumped up. "An' where did you get this place, may I ask?"

"I got it from you, what's left of it. An' mighty little too."

"Soan!"

Pier ignored him. "An' another thing, Ma. When I come into the house, I expect Nertha to answer me first, not you. You're livin' with us, not we with you."

Nertha, flushed, got slowly to her feet. "If I'm causin' trouble, I——"

Pier reached forward, gripping her arm. "Now don't act like a pussyfoot. Talk up to the old folks like you been a doin'. Remember, you an' I's took over. You're my wife an' what we say goes."

Ma Lysbeth paled. "Do you mean, soan, that you've put Nertha ahead of me?"

"Yes."

Ma Lysbeth stood up. She held her long arms tight over her breast as if she were afraid someone were going to strip her.

"Now, Ma, sit down." Pier took a deep breath. "Let me tell you two a thing or two. I know it's you people who's given me this farm to run. An' I know it was good a you to make the deed over into my name, so that, if I want to, I kin kick you off. But kickin' you off ain't what I'm aimin' to do. It's that I'm askin' you, fer godsakes, please try to understand Nertha an' me. We're young. We're full of vim an' vinegar. An', if we're let alone, we're gonna get someplace. If." Pier found himself out of breath. "Two famblies in one house don't work. We just get into each other's way. So, I say, go to town an' retire. Take a rest. Please. Because we wanna get while the gettin's good."

Âlde Romke bounced up again. "Soan, are you forgetting you'll need a hired hand on this place? One hand needs another to wash itself clean, you know."

"Pa, I can do it all better alone."

"Is that so? Do you think you kin milk better than me? Huh? Ae. That's paticle work."

It was true. Âlde Romke was a miracle around cows. If one of the tits gave out, it was the old man who brought it back to normal again. He had a touch that calmed cows, relaxed them. No one could get more milk out of them than he. "Just the same, Pa, I want to do it alone."

Ma Lysbeth drew her gray shawl around her neck. She lifted a long needle-thin finger. "Soan, you're telling us to go?"

"Yes." He looked directly into her eyes. "Yes. I simply just can't stand this kermis no longer."

She shook her head. "My own soan. My own soan. He says that to me." She shivered. "Soan, you've got a heart as cold as ice an' as hard as stone." She shook her head again. "Nertha, well may you pray God to have mercy on your soul. This wild one is going to boss you right into your grave."

"Ma, I just know what's best fer us, is all."

Âlde Romke waggled a prophetic finger. "Soan, I predict a terrible day ahead for you, belittling your âlden so. De Âlde Han sil dy slaen."

"Maybe so. Maybe so. But if he does, it'll be my doin', not yers."

"A terrible day."

"Look, you people goin' or not?"

No one moved.

"I'll even pay yer rent an' grocery bill."

"We can pay our own way," Ma Lysbeth said, lifting her head superiorly. "We ain't helpless yet. Before we take charity from our children, we'll go to the poor farm first."

"Now, that ain't necessary. An' you know it."

"A terrible day," Âlde Romke continued to murmur. "A terrible day. It jonkje hat 'n wjirm yn it brein. Ae. De Âlde Han sil him slaen."

Pier rolled his shoulders.

" 'N wjirm."

"Shut up."

Softly but distinctly the old man continued to mumble in his red-gray beard. " 'N wjirm yn it brein."

· 5 ·

But a worm had also crawled into Âlde Romke's brain.

After he and Ma Lysbeth and their personal belongings had been settled in a bungalow on the edge of Starum, Alde Romke suddenly found himself with nothing to do. His work hands swelled.

It was middle afternoon. Alde Romke walked out onto the porch.

He drew up the low crotch of his black woolen trousers and sat down on the front steps of the bungalow, facing the warm May sun. He ran his fingers through his red-gray beard.

The blinds in the house across the street were drawn. Inside sat

his old enemy, Âlde Folkwâlda, the only remaining Starum pioneer beside himself. Groaning, and crossing his short legs, Âlde Romke lighted his curve-stem pipe.

He nodded to himself. Ae, he had wronged his son. He had botched up the boy's life. His boast that he could make him as educated as any worldly American had backfired. Âlde Romke threw a glance toward the plateau of land west of Red Bluff. On that upland farm worked the boy, ignorant, with no way of reading or writing his way out of trouble. And without his father to help him. Âlde Romke groaned.

He heard Ma Lysbeth's rocker creak in the parlor behind. The sound of the cracking runner irritated him. Ever since Pier had moved them she had been wordless, rocking or sleeping, holding her big belly, her eyes wells of hurt, sometimes smoking her clay pipe, sometimes sucking peppermints.

He heard the door slam across the street and looked up. It was bald-headed Âlde Folkwâlda. Âlde Romke had an impulse to wave, but held back when the old fellow threw him a hostile glance. With log-thick legs and tub-round belly, Âlde Folkwâlda went into his truck garden and began to weed.

Âlde Romke growled to himself. "That old gray bull. What's he got that makes him so high an' mighty today, huh? His woman didn't do any better by him than mine by me. She only dropped him a daughter, from whom he now has that granddaughter Kaia, a hex and a whore, an' that dimwit Stephan. At least my old hen laid herself a man, a real man."

He shifted in his chair. "I suppose," he thought sourly, "I suppose Âlde Folkwâlda thinks I'm lazy, sitting here all by myself on my porch in the sun. How little he knows that I'm more than willing to put in an honest day's work, like a good man should. Wo'dammit."

Ma Lysbeth coughed. Âlde Romke jumped as if he had been shot at. He glared around at her through the screen door. He growled a little, wondering if she would take after him if he swore at her. He scratched himself.

Then he made up his mind. He would have himself a walk. He could stand the idleness no longer. He had to have something to do. It was better to walk out one's sorrows than to sit rotting in the sun like an old useless boar.

He shuffled west toward Blood Run Creek. To his left towered Red Bluff.

The hill stirred him. Its rusty gravels and scrubby growth reminded him of the old legends, of the Old Country, of It Âlde Làn.

As an honorable freeholder in Âld Fryslân he hadn't had a chance against the big absentee landlords. They had slowly squeezed him into the servant class. But he had had too much pride to accept the inevitable and had promptly migrated to America. Like Friso of old, who had chased an ancient people out of the marshes of the North Sea and become an Adam to his tribe, he had come to America to drive the Indians out of the prairies of Iowa and set up a line of free Frixens.

Âlde Romke wasn't sure he was glad he had come. Sometimes he wondered whether it might not have been better to have been the servant of a Frisian landlord than to have become lonesome in a free land. In Âld Fryslan it had been possible to have a few dreams and warm friends. People felt safe on their little squares of bogland sod. The very land was sweet with the dust of the brains of fathers and friends.

Âlde Romke looked at the sweep of Iowa land to the east. It was as open as the endless universe. How could a man feel safe in a place where the skin of a home was open on all sides to the wild elements, where the moan of the mourning doves was the echo of eternity blowing across the earth? Ae, It Âlde Làn, with its land walled up against the wild furies of the ocean, with its towering Stone Man to guide the lost and weary at sea, ae, there, there was the land where a man's bones were safe in a storm, where heirlooms and friends were always near to warm the cockles of the heart when things went wrong.

He glanced at Red Bluff again. He remembered how he had chosen, out of all the prairies he had seen, this land because the rusty hill had reminded him of It Reaklif, of its legend—how in the time of Christo a flame of fire had roared out of it, how, four days later, a smoking dragon with a flame for a tongue had hovered in the sky above it for an hour, how the dragon had gone into hiding, how, two hundred years later, the cliff had exploded and vanished, how the dragon had come out once more to terrify the people. From that time on, until 1825, no clouds, no rain, had been able to touch the area. And then the North Sea had come in to flood it and swallow it forever.

He walked on, passing Ol' Spit Triggs's sleepy rendering works, turning south with the creek. The creek doubled up to strike through a narrow gully.

The worm stirred in his brain. He waved his hands. He gestured, berating Pier in his mind.

"Pier. Soan. Now that you have been given your head, don't forget the ways of your fatherland. Deny not the blood in your bones. For remember, I ha' put my hands on you, an' upon you has fallen the task of keeping the Frixen line alive. You are 'n stamhâlder."

He mumbled, muttered, gestured. He stumbled across the tangles of dead weeds, upon new seedlings that were trying to get through the dead growth.

"An' don't neglect the breeding of our cattle. The cow is sacred to us Frisians."

He climbed the rise on the northwest corner of Pier's farm. He looked across the valley of Blood Run Creek. Just this side of Old Dreamer Pederson's five-acre place, on a terrace, bubbled the mounds of the Mound Builders. The mounds resembled the old terps in Âlde Fryslàn. The mounds, like them, were almost leveled by wind and water. He recalled how in 1869, the first year of his coming, when he was a peppy twenty-three, he had climbed one day to the top of Red Bluff. For hours he had stood gazing at the flowing grasses on the prairies beneath, to the east, to the south, to the west down by the Big Sioux banks. Suddenly he had seen, looking to the north across Blood Run Creek, rows of mounds on the land. The grass on them had been burned by the sun. A cropping of stones and gravel just beneath the surface had fried the growth on them. He had stared at them, fascinated. He counted a hundred forty-three. What strange thing was this? Had a people as ancient as the Free Frisians lived and worshiped here in the olden days? Had there lived in this wilderness a tribe like the lost Israelites? And when? Had they worshiped a golden calf too? And a serpent?

Then he had seen something that made him shiver. The glistening burnt-yellow spots lay in seven wriggling rows, like seven long gigantic serpents wriggling toward the Hills of the Lord to the west. Even the mound where the head should be was of proper size, and higher, as if the serpents were lifting their heads to hiss at the hills. He recalled that the children of Israel, swervelings in the desert of Arabia, had worshiped a serpent made of brass by Moses

to save themselves from venomous snakes. Ae, it could easily be that an ancient people had worshiped the serpent here too.

Âlde Romke, standing on a level with the mounds, and remembering, wondered and shook his head. It was a strange land, a land of hexes, of pagan ways. Stavo, Wodan, Thor, Fosite, Freya, even Wrâlda, the ancient of ancients, would feel to home here.

Or, could it be that the Free Frisians themselves had built these terplike mounds? Had not the Free Frisians periodically cast lots to see who should leave and colonize new land to relieve the overpopulation in Âlde Fryslân? And hadn't It Âlde Boek talked about a tribe of people who had built barrows all through northern Europe and England and America?

Or could it be that this was It Âlt Lân, or Atlantis, that It Âlde Boek spoke of?

Trembling at these thoughts, Âlde Romke filled his curved pipe. Tobacco grains spilled over his jumpy, veined, gnarled fingers. He lighted a match; and then, a stream of smoke veiling out behind him, strode on.

He imagined that he was a hero again, struggling against the evil ones, against segueners, against the widow witch Kaia who had hexed Pier with her evil black eyes.

He sighed. Life was full of the pitting of oneself against the bad.

And never had it been more true than the first years of his life in Siouxland. Ae. Those first days.

Those days had been full of disasters and despairs, of calamitous rumors, of storms and cyclones and hails, of prairie floods and fire. Once, small brown Colorado locusts, a fearful vermin with the letter *W* on the forehead, had rained upon the land in floods, devouring the crops and pasturage, terrifying the women and children. The *W* no doubt had been the mark of Wrâlda. One year it became so cold that frost reached down from the north to grip the land every month of the summer. Great, week-long snowstorms in October of 1880, in January of 1888, in February of 1909, in January of 1912, blinded the land. And tornadoes in 1890 and 1895 wrote strange scripts on the prairie surface.

And yet the new land had seemed wonderful to him too. When he drove his wagon across it at the head of a tiny caravan of Frisians, he found the rivers and streams crystal-clear. Pike and sunfish and trout sparkled in the rapids. The low places were

sloughs, full of moving life, full of frogs who croaked the night long through, "Worrk! Worrk! Worrk!"

He sighed. Those were the days. Men and women, children and dogs, horses and cows, and the young things, trampling in the tall reed grass, became creatures bewitched. There were yellow lilies in the watery bogs and green saw grass on the hills. And flowers everywhere: wild roses, cornflowers, wild black-eyed Susans, fire lilies, pink oxalis, and violets at the foot of tall bluestem grass. And living things: quail, mourning doves, pelicans, song sparrows streaming through the evening dusk, bobolinks, curlews, angry red-and-yellow-winged blackbirds protecting their nests in the slurky sloughs, meadow larks, swallows chasing dragonflies, killdeer calling "Killdeer! Killdeer!", fat plovers mating in the early mornings. And monarch butterflies with wings like the white sailtops of covered wagons.

Ae, bewitched they had been, bewitched; and blind fools not to have seen the trouble ahead. They should have seen the signs in the myriads of mosquitoes that flew up from the soggy swales. They should have observed the ways of Chief Yellow Smoke and his Sioux Indian bands, who killed only enough for the day's needs and then roved on. They should have seen that the shadows were full of portents of evil days to come. Werewolves and elves and gnomes flitted through the dreams of children. Nightmares troubled the women. One winter, after they had settled snug and warm into their sod dugouts, Âlde Folkwâlda's wife, Nala, she of gypsy blood, had been appointed devil banisher to combat the weird lights at the window, the quick footsteps and derisive laughters in the dark. Âlde Romke nodded. They had been brave.

And they had gone ahead. They unloaded their silver teapots from the covered wagons, their Edammer cheeses, smoked beeves, rye breads, rusks, currants, Sint Nicolas cookies, their beers and whiskies, their anisette that the young boys used at courting time. Before the men could get the plow out of the wagon, the women planted lettuce and radish seeds in the soft gopher mounds.

In the winter they lived on side pork and rye coffee. They shivered with their horses and Frisian-Holsteins and dogs and Berkshire hogs in the dust and lice and bedbugs of the sod huts. They burrowed into the earth like gophers. And they survived it.

Men sometimes got lost on the oceanic country even in the daylight. So they cut single furrows from farm to farm.

For meat the men shot deer and elk, for fruit the children picked rosy wild strawberries from the floor of the prairie, for sweets the women poured bumblebee honey from stubby combs.

They shot rustlers on sight, whether the culprits were church elders or not. To combat claim jumpers, they elected fence-viewers.

Avidly they opened up the land to the sun; they believed that broken land drew heavy rains more quickly than did virgin.

They felt the need of God. They built a church, called a domeny. And worshiped.

But not even the domeny had been able to avert trouble. And after a while, the Frisian settlers, who came from a tribe last to be christianized in Europe, went each their way, so that the present-day church elders could collect only enough money to hold two services a month, one every other Sunday. Domeny Beckstrom, Old White Wings Himself, charged a good price for his sermons.

Ae, the country had been full of evil. It had not made men prosperous or happy. Âlde Romke nodded. Even good men like himself had lived a doomed life on it. The land was a woman, treacherous, touched, bewitched; it was like Kaia, it was like Âlde Folkwâlda's wife; ae, like Ma Lysbeth.

Âlde Romke's feet slowed. He stopped. He had come to the banks of the Big Sioux. He had walked down the slope from the plateau without knowing it.

The heart-shaped leaves of the tall, curving willows flickered and turned and glinted in the sun. Below, at his feet, waters twisted and eddied, and washed the sand bars at the turn, and lapped at the sunburned roots of an undermined ash. Shadows from the red elm and the towering snake-smooth bass spread umbrellas of cool and scented air.

Tears streamed down his weather-seamed face. His heart cried. He tugged at his arrow-sharp beard. His anguish became an ecstasy.

By a river in Siouxland he stood weeping. He could not forget Âld Fryslân. On fallen willow leaves he rained his tears. His old knees trembled. The weight of his sorrows was heavy.

His soan had said to him, "Sing, for this is a good land, sing and be happy!" Ae, how could he have mirth, have song, in a strange land?

"Lân fan myn âldfaers," he cried, "if I ever forget thee, let my

bones ache in agelong misery after I die. Strike me dead if I love not Âld Starum more than this Gomorrah."

By a river in the Siouxland he stood weeping. He was cast forth by his soan. He was but a dog in the eyes of his soan.

Lonesome he was for old carnival times, for the merke, for wild music and anisette and wild fammen.

Lonesome he was for It Âlde Làn where canals were sweet with water lilies, where storks built nests on high.

Gladly would he have given up some prized treasure, or his beloved curve-stem pipe, to see again the purple herons stalking on the dikes like guards, to hear once more the sandpipers and starlings calling.

He remembered the old houses with their alcoves in the walls and their Norman doors to the north, the cows and horses and pigs who lived under the same roof with them and who were kept clean as children. He tasted once more milk sweet with the smell of aniseed. He smelled anew the abele tree white with blossoms.

A fish splashed in the water at his feet. He watched it snap through the curling waters, saw it vanish into the dark beneath the overhanging wild brush on the bank. He peered at the moving stream, wondered how many fish and strange water-breathing creatures were swerveling in its secret deeps.

And an old memory splashed in his mind. He recalled that his grandmother's people had been fisherfolk, a wild, sea-roving people, pagans, woaste Friezen, quick to lust, quick to fight, quick to sing, quick to challenge authority, quick to defend the helpless.

He studied the river speculatively. Maybe he could relive the old days by fishing this wide stream. Could a man make a living with a good seine? There were plenty of catfish, pickerel, perch, carp in every bend of the river. He watched the waters twist at his feet.

The sun, setting on the western hills, thrust long spears of gold into the river waters.

And the splash of memory fell back again, was reabsorbed. The sorrowing waters churned on.

He pulled out his old-fashioned gold watch, clutching the stem as if it were the ear of a naughty child. It was past suppertime. He sighed. Ma Lysbeth would be waiting at the window, stonily silent, the food soggy and cold on the table behind her. When he thought of the tongue-lashing he would get from her, he instinc-

tively hunched up his narrow shoulders and trundled homeward. His toes dragged through the grass.

As he neared his house, he was surprised to see Âlde Folkwâlda sitting on the front steps of his house across the street. The old fellow was bent forward. He seemed dejected.

Âlde Romke paused in his slow steps. He nodded. Ae, so there were others who had sorrows then. Ae, we are all, all, creatures of sorrow. We are all as lonesome as the mourning doves.

Âlde Romke studied the bowed figure intently. Sobs were shaking his neighbor.

Compassion welled in him. Slowly, a little fearfully, Âlde Romke stepped across the street. He wondered if Ma Lysbeth were watching from her window.

He neared his old enemy. Âlde Folkwâlda's head lay on his knee. His right hand hung slack.

"Friend," began Âlde Romke, clearing his throat, "freon, are you in trouble?"

The slack hand tightened, the loose neck muscles tautened.

"Friend? Âlde?"

Âlde Folkwâlda lifted his face. In the evening's dusk his light blue eyes were dark. Small purple veins wriggled over his eyeballs. His bald head glowed dull red. "Is it you, Romke?"

"Ae."

Âlde Folkwâlda looked down.

"Âlde . . . ?"

Âlde Folkwâlda looked up. "Is it really you, Romke? Freon?"

"Ae."

"Ah." The old fellow sighed. "I can't see well tonight."

Alde Romke, heartened by the other's tone, sat down beside him, wondering. He said, "Freon."

"Romke, I have trouble. Beek sorrow." An occasional, involuntary sob tumbled the tubby belly between Alde Folkwalda's upraised knees.

Âlde Romke blinked. "Yes?"

"Would to God I had never fathered her mother."

Âlde Romke pricked up his ears. "Your grandchild? Kaia?"

"Ae."

Âlde Romke remembered. Kaia's grandmother, Nala, Âlde Folk-

wâlda had kidnaped from a gypsy caravan. The segueners or gypsies had stolen some of his chickens, and Âlde Folkwâlda had replied in kind. Âlde Romke remembered how Âlde Folkwâlda had bragged in the streets of Starum, "A hen for a hen." And Nala didn't seem to mind. She became his slave. Âlde Romke nodded to himself. Ae, he remembered Nala all right. Though he was already married, he had himself secretly fallen in love with the black-eyed merry witch. He begrudged Âlde Folkwalda his good fortune, and shortly after the kidnaping, had a falling out with him. Later, Âlde Romke predicted that their child, Marya, would prove to be a seguener, a mother of hexes. When Kaia was born a generation later to Marya, about the same time that Ma Lysbeth's womb at last opened and bore Pier, Âlde Romke was sure of it. And the birth of the dimwit, Stephan, clinched it. Âlde Romke avoided Âlde Folkwâlda's unfortunate grandchildren like he avoided snakes.

"Ae, Romke, would to God I had never fathered her mother."

"Oh?"

"Romke, my granddaughter is a whore. Yesterday she was only a hex, but today she is also a whore."

"Oh? How so?" He noticed that Âlde Folkwâlda's breath smelled like freshly broken raw iron, and drew away from him a little.

"I cannot understand it."

Âlde Romke nodded, and patted the other's knee and then drew out his pipe and lighted it.

Alde Folkwâlda cleared his eyes a little and pulled out his Old Country pipe too. "She cannot be of my seed. Her grandmother must have got her mother in the bushes."

"But, Âlde, freon, how can you know?"

Âlde Folkwâlda groaned. "I heard it from his lips himself. That devil! That son of a bit."

"But who, mate?"

"That Blacktail. He has been bragging."

"That devil!" Âlde Romke exploded, puffing his pipe. Billows of smoke whirled upward. "That son of a bitsie."

"Ae."

"Hy is 'n bastert fan Babylon." Âlde Romke shook his fist.

"Ae." Smoke puffed up from Âlde Folkwâlda's pipe too. "I am of half a mind to eunuch that soan fan Ingelân."

"Ae."

Âlde Folkwâlda shook his head sadly. "This younger generation, ae, de dea sit har yn it herte."

Âlde Romke nodded. "Ae. De wrâld sil forgean." He coughed. "Freon, that is our consolation. That we won't be here when this world goes up in fire an' smoke."

"But the great fire is already here, Âlde."

"Oh?"

"Have you not heard of the great war?"

"Not in It Âlde Lân?"

"Ae. There."

"No!"

"But it's true."

"Och."

"Ae."

"Freon, I see terrible times ahead."

Âlde Folkwâlda looked at him with surprise. "They are here already, freon."

"Oh?"

"Ha. It is our President. He is grabbing up our best young men like a dragon, an' throwing them into the flames of war."

"No."

"Ae. An' married men too."

Âlde Romke drew in a sudden breath. "Maybe Pier too?"

"Ae."

"Ah. Then trouble is really here."

The two old lost crows sat nodding together in the dark. For a long time they sat, shaking their gray old beards. They puffed on their curve-stem pipes, stirring up hot coals of tobacco. Sometimes the little bulb of fire in the bowl of their pipes lighted up their wrinkled, leathery faces.

A star burned silver and high in the west sky. The purple night flowed in from the east.

After a while Âlde Romke raised a finger. "Âlde, there will be terrible times. I predict an' prophesy that in times to come men shall run like hungry wolves through the street. An' they that have a small store of bread shall become afraid, an' they shall become miserly, an' growl. An' the hireling dogs shall close the miserable doors of the rich man's castle. No longer shall the keys of a city be offered to a stranger wayfaring by. All this I predict an' prophesy."

Âlde Folkwâlda nodded. "Ae."

"An' men shall become wanderers. Swervelings in a strange land. At the mercy of the Âlde Han."

Âlde Folkwâlda puffed on his pipe.

Âlde Romke tried to image the destruction the Great Fire was making in Fryslân, the fatherland. But he could not. And the contrast between what he knew was and what he felt was not, came suddenly to him. He had cut himself off from his land forever. He cried. He himself was really and at last a swerveling forever. "Here I am, an old man in a foreign land. An' I am going to die." He agonized. "Where shall my grave be?"

"Ae, we are as the grass in November, withering."

"An' my dust, will it find peace here?"

"No one knows." Âlde Folkwâlda sighed heavily. "Ya, freon, so is it."

"Ae, so is it."

"Ya."

"Well, Âlde, the bed calls."

"Ya."

Groaning, he got up and in the night's dark went across the street to his own house, puffing his pipe, smoke billowing out behind him.

He entered the door. He found Ma Lysbeth sitting as still as a stone in her chair. And the supper on the table cold.

. 6 .

Pier lay on the horsehair sofa in the living room. Supper lay warmly in his stomach. The gas-lamp light was white and sharp on the cream-and-silver wallpaper.

He rubbed his back on the hard leather, pushing himself up and twisting his head deep into a pillow. His muscles ached sweetly. The day had been a hard one.

It was a good life. He sighed happily when he thought of the dark earth and the juicy seedling potatoes he had planted in it. His sharp hoe had cut it easily. He could still feel the rhythm of the work in his arms and legs: drop one, kick one, and cover over with a half twist of toe. He stretched and yawned. And sighed again.

Nertha sat beyond his feet, slowly creaking a brown wood rocker. She was patching one of his overalls. He looked at her and

wondered what thoughts were buzzing in her head. A faint smile turned on her lips. Her eyelids were slightly flared, as if she were staring into a dream and smiling at what she saw in it. The gaslight cast a path of light across her crown of silver-blond hair. It was like a flash of moonlight on water.

Pier watched her, and wondered. It was four weeks since the ceremony but he still didn't know what it meant to be married. He forced his thoughts to the fore part of his brain. Just what was a wife?

He could not get the feel of her in his fingers. He could not call up a live and flesh-warm image of her when he closed his eyes.

He looked at her face. He noted the few pale freckles climbing the slope of her nose. He examined her thin flared nostrils, the vague blue shadows under her eyes, her white forehead, her green eyes, her silver hair.

He looked at her breasts. Had they trembled beneath his fingers last night? He had barely touched them then, fearing too much of a good thing, turning away from her, drifting away into a restless sleep.

And what was a bosom? Wal, it was soft rising bread dough. It was a soft hill fuzzy with grain. Yes, and for the suckling, it was the cup of life that mysteriously ever refilled itself.

He resisted an impulse to reach and touch them, to have them real, this moment, in his fingers.

Or her thighs? What were they? They were two falling slopes, with a slough. Ah, the woman of her was sweet and moist.

He forced his thoughts to one point in his brain. Who was Nertha? He wrinkled his brow. He knew more about her sitting off to one side, studying her, than he did touching her.

That first night. The room had been mellow with lamplight and wedding gown. He had moved, and his head had filled with a roaring, had filled with the bursting spume of blood-red mist. A long breath later, and he had awakened to the shining of the morning sun upon them. And he had found himself lying startled and frightened beside a woman, a real woman, with gently sloping breasts tossing as she lay sussing in her sleep.

Every morning he had awakened thus and yet, every day, he had been unable to fix her solidly in his memory. She was a dream, a mist He was sure of it.

And something strange, a way of living, was growing up between them. She was at once more his and at the same time less his. He could possess her body and yet not possess her spirit.

Sometimes she could be so far away from him that even her body seemed not there. He detected it in the sly smile on her lips, as if she had a knowledge of him that he did not have. He felt it in the slightly exasperated "Good morning, Pier." Oddly enough the sly smile, the exasperation, always appeared the morning after he had taken her.

He pondered.

The buttons on his overall dug into his back. He twisted on the sofa. He uncrossed his legs and stretched his toes inside his blue-gray cotton socks.

His thoughts veered. Abruptly he recalled Âlde Romke. How were the old folk getting along? He had heard rumors that the old man had talked of fishing the Big Sioux. Ol' Spit Triggs had even claimed he had seen him carrying a homemade seine. O ' Spit Triggs had laughed, "Well, Pier, that's what happens when y'u ain't got nothin' to do. You get to be an outlaw."

Pier thought about the word "outlaw." Many of the younger folk, and even some of the older men, living along the Big Sioux, below and above Gitchie Manitou, were known to the rest of the country as outlaws. Many a game warden had gone into the rolling, coagulated bluffs to catch men seining or hunting out of season; but, though he heard the shouts of the seiners, and often heard shots, he always came out a baffled man. The broken land, the heavy woods, the twisting bends in the river, made the Big Sioux breaks an ideal hide-out. It was the country Jesse James had returned to whenever he had broken the law.

Pier hoped the old man wasn't heading for trouble. The old gent was the most impractical fool alive. Pier recalled an argument he had had with the old fellow exactly a year ago, at potato-planting time. Âlde Romke had sworn by the Almighty that potatoes had to be planted in the moonlight or they would go to tops. Pier grunted. Moonlight. Tops. What a lot of flapdoodle that was.

"What you growling about?"

"Huh?"

It was Nertha, smiling at him, cocking exploring eyes at him. "What you growling about, huh?"

"Nothin'."

"It must a been somethin'. You almost talked out loud."

"It was nothin'."

"Still growlin' at Pa?"

"Wal, yeh."

"Pier, he meant all right."

Pier measured her with a glance. "Did Ma mean all right too?"

Nertha rocked gently, bent her eyes on her patching.

Pier watched her a moment; then sat up, stretching. "Hoooh. Whew. I sure put in a day's work today."

She looked up, her eyes firm again. "Pier, when're you gonna learn to read?"

Pier dropped his arms. "What?"

"Pier, I was thinkin' that if you was to spend a little time each night studyin' to read an' write, you could pretty soon do it."

Pier stared.

"There's no reason why you can't learn, Pier. Ye're a smart enough man. An' quick."

Pier wrinkled his brows. "Are y'u beginnin' to wish you'd a grabbed off Old White Wings?"

"Ohnono. Of course not."

"Wal, then leave me alone."

She rocked awhile.

Pier rubbed his nose and wondered what she would say next.

"Really, Pier, I don't see why you don't learn t'read an' write."

"I said 'no.' "

She threw a glance at him and stood up and went to a wall rack from which she drew a magazine. "Here. Try lookin' at this. At least you kin read the picture." It was an issue of *Wallace's Farmer*. "Try it. It won't bite you."

"But——"

"If ye're gonna be a good farmer, like you say you are, you might just as well know what's in it."

"Aw, I ain't got the time."

"Layin' on yer back there?"

"Aw, I'm tired. I've just put in a good day's work."

"I thought young men never got tired."

"That's what you think."

She thrust the magazine beneath his nose. "Here."

Reluctantly he glanced at the magazine. "My eyes are tired already," he grunted, laughing a little.

A smile came to her lips too. "Please, Pier. Try to figure out the words." She sat beside him. She opened a page and pointed at the headline of an article. "What's that word?" She leaned against him.

Pier felt her softness. "Uh, uh, fff . . . farmers?" he asked, guessing shrewdly, not having the least notion why the little rows of marks should evoke such a sound.

"See! You see. You can read."

"Huh."

"Now try the next word."

Pier studied. It looked like the weak dunging of a drunk sparrow.

"Go ahead."

He began to feel restless inside.

"Mm . . . mm . . ." she hinted. "Go ahead. Try it."

Pier laughed and slipped his bulging arm about her.

"Mm. . . mm . . ." she hinted again.

"Mm, what a nice mamma I got here. Mm."

"Pier!"

"Can I help it? Lady, when you sit next to me, I feel like I wanna tear the house down."

Nertha laughed. The sly look in her eyes vanished. A yearning began to soften them.

"An' I feel like I wanna run a long run."

"Yes, Pier." She slipped up on his lap. She twisted in his arms. Her fingers fluttered at his neck.

His leg began to jump beneath her. He tried to quiet it. He tried to keep his head clear. This time, he swore, this time he would enter her and know what it was like. Involuntary gasps, like the sighs of a child after a spanking, burst from him. His eyes closed.

Verses shot through his mind like swift birds. He whispered, swinging his knee beneath her:

"The needle's eye
That doth supply
The thread that runs so true.
And many a lass
Have I let pass
Because I wanted you."

"That's nice, Pier."

His tongue stirred in thick honey. "Sometime I'll play it on my harmonicky fer y'u. An' on my accordeen."

"That'll be real nice."

Clouds of red mist closed upon him. A whirlwind turned in his brain. He pressed her down on the sofa.

"Not here, Pier," she whispered.

"Why not? Does a bu——" He paused. The red mist cleared some. He remembered Blacktail's talk: "I'm probably the only male around here who gives the woman a decent time of it. Most of you blokes rape your women. And leave them stunned and wondering what next." Why, that had been exactly the look on Nertha's face the last time. How, what, what was it that a man did?

He tried to keep his senses clear, he tried to joke. He whispered:

"O! the lady of the house
Has a mouse
In her blouse!"

She did not respond. She was swooning beneath him.

His hands found the peach globes within her blouse. The red mist closed in again. Once inside the red world he found himself rushing toward a narrow opening of light. He had to get there. His hurrying feet barely touched the earth.

· 7 ·

The next morning Nertha looked off to one side again. And Pier slunk out of the house.

As he puttered through the chores on the yard, he threshed the trouble around in his mind, only half aware of what he was doing. He was thoroughly puzzled; and irked that Nertha should look at him so accusingly and that Blacktail's remark about raping a wife should disturb him.

It was with difficulty that he turned his mind to the work of the day. He saw that, though the corn was already popping out of the earth in some places, it still was too small to cultivate. There was really nothing to do except to get at jobs he had earlier set aside for a rainy day. One of them was to sell a load of grain to pay off a

bill at the Starum Mercantile; another was to tell Ol' Spit Triggs that he had a dead cow for his rendering works.

Before he left the yard with the loaded wagon, he tied up the horses, Maid and Mell, to the hitching post by the woodshed. He entered the house.

Nertha looked up from the stove. Her green-blue eyes were quilty-quick.

"Wal, I'm off to town. Need anything?"

A vague smile parted her pink lips. She nodded. Silently she went into the pantry. She picked up a stubby pencil. She tore off a bit of paper from a brown bag. She wrote, sometimes stopping to wet the point of the pencil with her tongue.

"I'll change overalls, then, while ye're makin' it out," he said.

Once in their bedroom, he swore softly to himself. Things were wrong. Double wrong. Trying to live with a woman wasn't the same as trying to farm a piece of land. The land was easy to figure. All you did was to stick the seeds in it in the spring and in the fall you gathered up the harvest. It didn't raise a rumpus, it didn't give you sour looks in the morning, it didn't act like it had been cheated. But a woman . . . ah, that was different. There seemed to be all sorts of frills and fancy doings you had to go through before you got anything out of them. Yessiree.

He felt dressed up in the new overall. He tramped into the kitchen.

"Got the list ready?"

She nodded. She looked at him briefly; then, almost sadly, looked to one side. With the flat of her hand she smoothed out the dress over her thighs.

"Be back by dinner," he said.

He drew the door shut after him. He tugged at his blue cap. He rolled his shoulders and walked toward the waiting horses. He untied the hitching straps.

"You know," he said to himself, "you know, she makes me feel like a crim'nal. Judas Priest." He stepped up on the front wheel and with a grunt swung himself onto the jouncy spring seat. He unfastened the lines from the corner of the wagon box. "She really does." He sighed. "Wal, girls, let's get a-goin'. Git." He slapped the lines over their harnessed backs.

The grays trotted off the yard. They climbed the swell east of the house.

He glanced back. Pigeons were circling the cupola on the barn. The sun caught them and their sleek bodies burned a flashing blue.

In town, his oats unloaded, his bill paid, Nertha's groceries bought, he loitered beside his wagon. The horses were tied to a post in front of an empty building.

He wriggled his scalp beneath a new straw hat. The edges of it cut into his forehead. It would take a week of wearing to make it part of himself.

Main Street was deserted. Storekeepers were inside busily tidying up their stock for the Saturday sale. Farmers were all at work in the fields.

A mourning dove began to croon in the weeping willow on the yard of a villager across the street. An enormous cottonwood, its varnished leaves clittering in the sunlight, towered above the grain elevator where Pier had just brought his grain.

He tugged at his worn, braided-leather watch chain. The cheap watch slipped easily out of the bib-front pocket. He was surprised to find it was only ten o'clock.

He knew he should go home, if only to finish up other rainy-day projects. But he felt he wanted something more out of the trip. He thought about the idea of seeing the old folks but decided against it. This morning was one morning he was sure to fight with them. Hand in pocket, he scratched his thigh. He scraped his foot back and forth in the sand of the graveled street.

There was a rattling on the stones behind him. From the east, along a short lane, a horse came trotting toward him drawing a low cart loaded with milk bottles. To the cart's side clung a bundly figure. It was Old Platte, the milkman.

Pier studied the man. The boys in the Beer & Billiard had nicknamed him Old Platte because he had once lived in Nebraska. It was a perfect fit. Old Platte's talk spread over the day like the Platte River spread over the Nebraska flats. And both were shallow.

The cart came up.

"Whoa," grunted Old Platte.

The horse began to coast to a stop.

"Whoa, Tip. Whoa there. Whoa, Tip."

The mare's backstrap snapped against her rump, pinching her tail.

"Whoa, Tip." A drop of clear, glistening snot hung from the old

man's potato-large nose. He sniffed up some of it, and wiped the rest into his walrus mustache. "Well. Pier. So it's you. How goes it?"

"Hi," greeted Pier. He nodded. "Oh, good."

Old Platte looked at Pier's wagon. "Been haulin'?"

"Yeh."

"Corn?"

"No."

Old Platte sniffed again. "Grain?"

"Yep."

"Get a good price fer it?"

"Toler'ble."

"Uh-huh. What'd you get, number two ratin'?"

"No. One."

"Huh."

"Yeh."

"Well, got the seed corn in?"

"It's comin' up already."

"Huh. Gophers botherin'?"

"Not to speak of."

"Cutworms?"

"No."

"Uh-huh. Milkin' ten head a cows yit?"

"Yeh."

"Uh-huh. Well, milkin's a ding-bastardly . . . say, y'u heard the news yit?"

"What news?" Pier drew out his corncob pipe and filled it. He peered past the edge of his straw hat.

"We got a new mayor. Blacktail. Peter Puddicombe."

Pier grabbed his pipe and took it out of his mouth. "How in the hell did that happen?"

Old Platte smirked. "Well, I tell you. You know how it is. He wasn't payin' his keep, was a charity deadhead fer the taxpayers. So they upped and elected him to a job. Now he's got to pay his way." He sniffed. "Besides, the work ain't hard. He can sleep doin' it."

"Judas Priest."

"Besides, there wasn't no old men no more who wanted it."

"Huh."

"Both your old man an' Âlde Folkwâlda's too proud. An' I'm too busy."

Pier clamped his teeth tightly together. Yes, he could just see Âlde Romke turning it down. If the old man couldn't run a farm, he'd be damned if he'd run anything else.

"Yeh. Well, guess I better be gettin' on. Milk'll be gettin' sour here settin' in the sun like this."

"Yeh."

"See you later. C'mon, Tip. Gettep. Get."

The mare groaned and swung her legs and slowly the cart began to roll. The wheels clanked, and cut a wiggling track in the graveled street.

Pier lit his pipe. He glanced up the street and saw two farmers, the Brandt boys, get out of a new Model T Ford. He saw them come down the street toward the implement shop. As Old Platte neared them, the men slowed their walk and nervously thrust their hands into their pockets. With elbows out, the men looked like awkward scarecrows. Then Pier heard one of them exclaim. Old Platte had told them the news.

All of a sudden Pier decided he had enough of Starum for one day. He untied the hitching straps and started for Ol' Spit Triggs's to tell him about the dead cow. He rattled past Old Platte and the Brandts. He waved at them with his pipe spuming in his hand.

Pier turned off the highway and took the back way home, a dirt road which ran along the north side of his farm and led past Ol' Spit Triggs's plant.

The way was hardly a road. A heavy spring growth of young weeds almost obscured its single track. It followed Blood Run Creek. Red Bluff loomed up on the left like a buffalo shoulder.

In a few moments he came upon the rendering works. The dead weeds of last fall were still standing and were so high that only the faded gray roof of the rambling one-story structure showed above them. Smoke pulsed slowly from a black chimney. Somewhere an engine puffed.

Pier turned off the dirt road and went down a lane. It bounced through a little washout, coiled around the plant.

A ways back stood a rambling shack. A troop of children played in a sandpile. Two were wrestling on the ground. A dog, too old to get up and bark, lay sleeping on a board walk. Slop-hole Gertie, Ol' Spit Triggs's wife, fat and oily, sat in a rocker on a sagging

porch. Pier waved at her but she didn't respond. It was hot and close in the narrow creek valley.

The stink of rotted bodies was strong. A critter hearse or rendering-plant truck stood leaning before the main door, its sides matted with dried dung, old hair, parts of skin, dried maggots. The right rear wheel was almost flat. The truck's drive chains dripped oil.

A trail led north to Blood Run Creek. Down it Ol' Spit Triggs hauled his refuse. Except for one ford, the creek was fast and offered good drainage for waste products.

Pier hopped off his wagon, strode to the door. He entered without knocking. A forcing odor almost gagged him. "Anybody here?" he shouted.

Coming into the shadowy interior, he was momentarily blinded. Then he saw something move. He blinked to focus his eyes. "Spit. You there?"

"Yeh." Ol' Spit Triggs shambled up, rubbing his beard, scratching his sides. The middle-aged manufacturer of fertilizer, who had been a failure as a farmer, was a bulky man. The sides of his overall were left unbuttoned, exposing the dirt-tanned skin over his hips. Tobacco juice ran down his chin from both corners of his mouth. Behind the man stood four enormous gray-crusted vats. From one vapors arose. A tumbling noise of boiling was in the air. Off to one side, on shelves, were rows and rows of fertilizer packed in sacks. Ol' Spit Triggs pushed back his cap. "What's ailin' you?"

"Nothin' much. Just that I got a dead cow t'home. Down by the pasture gate there. Must a got too much a the dew one mornin'."

"Young or old?"

"Middlin'."

"Uh-huh. Yeh, all right. I'll be right over t'get it."

"Be sure to."

Ol' Spit Triggs rubbed his side. "By God, if I didn't have lice, I'd think I had 'em."

Pier smiled a little.

"Yep." Ol' Spit Triggs burped.

Pier didn't care much about chewing the rag with the old duffer so he looked about for some excuse to make a quick but decent getaway. His eyes caught the shine of a new tool. "Hey, a new plier. I ain't seen one a these kind before."

Ol' Spit Triggs smiled through a two-day beard. The unwashed

mass of hair had no determinable color. Ol' Spit Triggs swaggered a little. "Yeh. I picked that up in Sioux Falls the other day. First one in this neck a the woods."

Pier worked the levers. He picked up a bolt and fitted the jaws of the pliers around it. "By God, a man can really get quite a purchase on it with this thing."

"Uh-huh."

"I must get one a them." Pier flicked the tool around in his hand once more. "Wal, guess I better get on home. You'll come an' get the critter?"

"I'll do my level best."

"Good."

Pier waved curtly and stepped out into the sun again. Blinking, he untied the horses from the hitching post and climbed onto the spring seat.

He had just started up the lane when a new car turned off the dirt road and bumped toward him.

Pier drove his horses part way off the weedy lane to let the oncomer pass by. The horses, still not used to cars, shied and Pier had all he could do to hold them.

The car came blatting toward Pier. In an instant Pier recognized Blacktail, the new mayor, at the wheel. He stiffened. Where did he get that car so quick?

Blacktail braked and stopped too, directly in the center of the lane. Blacktail's left fender faced Maid, Pier's left horse. The motor choked, died.

"Hi."

"Hello there, Frixen." Blacktail leaned out.

"See you got a new car?"

"Yes."

"Maxwell?"

"No. Reo."

"Huh." Pier admired its sleek lines, its pig-snout nose. "Like it?"

"Of course. Otherwise I wouldn't have it."

Pier bristled a little. "Huh. Didn't take you long to rob the Starum treasury, did it?"

Blacktail laughed, showing his chalk-white teeth. He pushed back his gray felt hat. As usual, he was immaculately dressed, though this

time he had left his tails at home in favor of a neat gray business suit. He wore gloves. His mustache was neatly clipped. He played with the big brown steering wheel. He blinked, and then moved as if he had made up his mind about something. "Look, Frixen, get out of the way. I've got work to do."

"How fast kin it go?"

"Frixen, are you going to block that road all morning? I'm in a hurry."

"Wal, hurry then."

"Get out of the way."

"I don't get you."

"Move over and let me by."

"Ain't half the road enough?"

"Not for me, you dike-jumping clodhopper. Move over. And snap it up."

"Holy horse collar, it didn't take you long to put on airs, did it? In office one day and already you own the country."

"Get out of the way, you farmer. Have you forgotten that I'm Peter Puddicombe, son of the Earl of Kancastra?" Blacktail spoke as if he knew the title was a joke but was using it anyway to put Pier in his place.

Pier shrugged. "That don't mean nothin' to me."

Blacktail's face tightened. He started up the motor.

Maid shied and rose on her rear legs. When the horse came down again and tried to go ahead, Pier's front wheel locked over Blacktail's fender.

Blacktail, his gray eyes suddenly flashing white-green, jumped out of the car, carrying a crank. He raised it.

With the speed of a flicking horse hoof, Pier struck. He reached down, caught the upraised arm of the other. In the same instant he came down off the wagon, his free hand tying the lines over a corner of the wagon box. "Hey, mister," he growled, "what do you think ye're goin' to do with that?" He bent the other's arm back until the skin at wrist whitened.

Blacktail twisted, trying to free himself.

"Lissen, mister. Maybe in England ye're the son of an earl, but out here in America, if you take more than yer share of the road, ye're just a plain ord'nary son of a bitch."

Blacktail struggled vainly.

Like an irresistible vise, Pier's fist continued to close over Blacktail's arm. The muscles in Pier's lean and lever-long arm rolled up like curling snakes. Sunlight gleamed on his sweaty, red-brown skin. Slowly Pier buckled back the man's arm, forcing him down to the ground. He twisted the man's arm until it cracked in its socket.

Blacktail grunted. He turned in the dust of the lane.

"Lay down, you son of a bitch. Lay down," Pier growled.

Through clenched teeth Blacktail gritted, "Frixen, you'll pay for this someday."

With a quick laugh, Pier released his hold and let the limp arm fall. "Now, mister, back up that car a yers, or so help me God, I'll break every damned bone in your body." He leaped up on his wagon.

Smoldering, Blacktail got into his car, backed up, drove around Pier. The Reo lurched through the ditch.

2. SUMMER

. 1 .

HE LOOKED UP FROM HIS CULTIVATING. The village bells were calling:

A-cleng, a-cleng.
O hear the chimes
Ring out the times.

A-cling-le-clang.
A nooning sleep
Your health will keep.

A-cleng, a-clung.
The midday's come
Now rest you some.

Pier drove up to the grove at the end of the field. The blacks, Colonel and Topsy, stopped the moment he said, "Whoa." He slipped the lines from his back and unloosened the knot. He noticed gray sweat streaks wriggling down the quarters and gaskins of the horses, and reflected to himself that June had been hard on the animals. After that cold rainy spell late in May the sun was at last making up for lost time. Wal, the horse's misery was the corn's delight. He threw the lines to one side. He lifted the shovels of the walking cultivator out of the soil and, bending over with a groan, wiped them with the half-rolled sleeve of his shirt until they gleamed. The reflection on the shiny surfaces distorted his face. He saw beads of sweat bubbling on his dusty, sun-reddened cheeks.

He stood up, and surveyed the field, holding his aching back for a moment.

The corn wasn't the only thing thriving in the hot, moist earth; the morning-glories, bindweed, foxtail, and wild roses were getting a good start too. In some places he could hardly follow the row through the clumps of weeds.

He nodded. Yes, he needed a hired hand. But where was he to get one? These war days they were scarce. Perhaps after all it hadn't been wise to let Âlde Romke go. Or, maybe he needed a riding cultivator. That might speed up the field work.

He unhitched the horses and threw the bridles over the hames. With a clap on their rumps he sent them toward the water tank. He followed them leisurely through the grove. The shade beneath the trees was like a bath in a creek. He lingered.

Surprised to find himself puffing, he sat down on a stump. Yes, that walking plow was a killer, especially if a man didn't have help doing the morning and evening chores.

He looked at his sweat-wet overall and was startled to see that his limbs no longer filled out the pant legs. He felt of his lean arms and of his belly. He was getting to be as gaunt as a run-down horse.

He heard the blacks neigh. Looking up, he saw them at the barn door, waiting for him to feed them. He got up, and slowly, stiffly, walked across the yard.

When he went in to dinner, he found Nertha in a sullen mood. He looked at her and asked, as he rolled up his sleeves to his shoulders and poured fresh water into a basin, "Wal, an' what's troublin' y'u today?"

"Nuthin'."

"Got a bee in yer bonnet?"

"It's nuthin'."

" 'Nuthin', nuthin'.' It's always 'nuthin' ' with you. Come, lady, talk up to yer old man."

"Well . . . it's that dratted milk separator."

"That on the blink again?"

"Yes. I was separatin' this morning an' something happened. There was a whirrin' noise an' then something fell kaput on the floor."

Pier groaned through a mass of soap bubbles. "Wal, I guess that fixes that old devil."

"I couldn't help it."

"I know. Wal, that settles it."

She turned, holding a fork above a steaming pot, her brows lifted in question. "Settles what?"

"That I just simply got to have help. I got to have a hired hand."

"Maybe we just need a new separator."

"No, it's more than that. I'm getting way behind in my work. One man can't farm a hundred sixty acres alone and do it right. No, I'll just have to get Pa, I guess." He rubbed his nose. "An' if I can't get him, I'll have to buy some more machinery."

"Will that cost much?"

"Too much. Too much. It'll wipe out the cream-check money I've saved against the interest on the mortgage." He sighed. He cleaned his ears with a soapy, prying finger. "Wal, I guess it can't be helped. After dinner, instead a gettin' my cat nap, I'll drive the trotters down and get Pa."

"Maybe I kin help in the field?"

Pier bristled. "Woman, are you loco?"

"But I can do field work."

"Nertha, let's get this settled once an' fer all. No woman a mine is gonna break her back in my fields. Her place is in the house, cookin' an' bakin'. The way I eat, that's more than plenty fer her." He rinsed his face.

"I was only offerin'."

"I know, Nertha. An' that's fine. Fine." He wiped his face in a raw linen towel. "It's a man I want in the field, not a pair a bloomers."

But Âlde Romke laughed at him, puffing on his curve-stem pipe.

Pier swallowed. Sitting in the sun on the front steps with his father, he tried to ignore the old man's chortling, tried to ignore Ma Lysbeth eavesdropping behind the screen door.

He cleared his throat. "Wal, Pa, maybe I was a little hasty. But, wal, you know . . ." He filled his corncob pipe and lighted it, and glanced at the other to see if he had used the right tone of voice.

Âlde Romke shook his head. "No, soan. Thank you just the same."

"But . . ."

"I don't mind loafin' in the sun. Not at all. I got it awright fine here."

"But . . ."

"Ae, an' it's the first time my bones ha' been rested in years."

Pier picked off a splinter from the wooden step below his foot. "I'll need somebody through harvestin' an' threshin' too."

Âlde Romke laughed again. He sucked on his pipestem. His light blue eyes sparkled. He pawed his sharp beard. "You should ha' thought of that before, soan."

"Wal, I'm not beggin', you know."

"Not at all."

"Wal, if that's the way you feel about it, Pa, I guess there's nothin' else to do but go down an' buy me a ridin' cultivator."

"Ridin' cultivator?"

"Yeh. With the walker, by nighttime I'm frazzled to a frizz, what with all the chorin' I got to do too."

Âlde Romke nodded. "Ae. So. The younger generation ain't so tough after all."

Pier reddened. "That ain't all I'm buyin'. I'm gettin' a new cream separator, too. The old Melette fell apart kaput this mornin'."

"Huh, an' I thought I was a wrecker."

"Yeh. Wal, I got to get the danged things or I won't have no crop ner nothin'. It seems a man's gotta buy a lot a machines now'days or get way behind his neighbors."

"You'd die if you wasn't first, wouldn't you, Pier?"

"Wal, I—"

"You'd rather go into debt up to your ears than let somebody get ahead of you. You're worse than a race-crazy trotter."

"Wal, do you want me to be a slowbull like Otto Grimovich?"

"Ae, you're race-mad. Loco." Âlde Romke puffed on his pipe.

He cleared his throat. "Well, if you must have them machines, go to Sioux Falls for them."

"Why?"

"Blacktail's bought out the blacksmith and implement shop. An' his charging price is steep."

Pier stood up. "Blacktail own the implement shop?"

"That's right. That son of a bitsie."

"What'd he do, get ambitious?"

"Ae. He ain't drunk a drop for a month."

"Wal what d'you know."

"Ae. So it goes."

"Wal, the son of a sea cook." Pier scratched his nose reflectively. "Wal, anyway, I can't go to Sioux Falls because I just ain't got the time. It'd take all of two days with the horses, goin' an' comin'. Nope, I'll just have to let Blacktail give me a minkin'. Like he says." He spat into the wind and put his pipe away. He watched the other craftily. "You sure you can't come, Pa?"

Âlde Romke shook his head. "No, soan, I got it good here. Perfect good."

. 2 .

Pier drove down the short, dusty street of Starum.

On an impulse, to get an opinion on the new Blacktail, he stopped in front of the Beer & Billiard to have a friendly talk with Herman Brackx, the proprietor.

He tied up his horses and went up the two rough-plank steps. Entering, he was surprised to see the saloon end of the place crowded with farmers. In the billiard end, two callow, wild-haired youths were playing, completely unaware of the scuffling men.

The heavy-armed, blue-overalled men crowded around the bar, drinking beer, arguing. They were neighbors and friends. Among them Pier recognized Kaia's brother, slow-witted Stephan Memek, who worked the land for her; the three sunflower-seed-spitting bachelor brothers of German-Russian descent, George, Peter, and Otto Grimovich, who together owned the section of land across the road south of Pier; Ol' Spit Triggs, with tobacco juice running down the corners of his mouth as usual; and stubby, bowlegged Red Joe Faber.

"Hi there, neighbors."

"Hallo."

" 'Lo, Pier."

There was a silence. Beer bubbles crackled in mugs. Eyes slowly circled. Mouth muscles twitched.

Pier asked, "Wal, what's louse here, a tar-an'-featherin' party?" He drew up a stool to the bar.

Fat Herman Brackx motioned toward the spigot.

Pier declined. He lighted his pipe instead. "Wal, ain't anybody gonna talk up?"

Herman Brackx, wiping the bar, said at last, "Oh, the boys are busy bitchin' again." His belly jerked and a belch escaped him.

"What about?"

"Oh, some a the boys has got bills outstandin' at the implement shop. An' now that Blacktail's took over, he's put the squeeze to 'em."

Red Joe protested. "Hell, it ain't that. Fact is, debts is the best investment a man kin make, because then the creditor will see to it y'u keep goin'. Naw, it's that we don't go fer Blacktail personally. Why, he's so mean, he'd just as soon skin us as not an' use our hides to scratch his matches on."

Pier grunted. "But you still ain't told me what this meetin's about."

Ol' Spit Triggs coughed. He spat a globe of dark juice into a brass cuspidor at his feet. "It's about the city scale."

"Yeh?"

"Yeh. You see"—Ol' Spit Triggs stroked his mangy beard, hitched up his overall suspenders, scratched his sides as if he had lice—"you see, that bastard Blacktail's not only bought out the grain elevator, he's hired some yellow-livered critter to run the city scale. As mayor he's got the power to appoint him."

"Oho. Now a light goes up. Who'd he hire?"

"Willie Rexwinkel. Weasel Willie. As you know, a snotnose. A snotnose only fifteen years old."

"Ha. The light gets brighter." Pier had a quick memory of Sheriff Rexwinkel's slim, flip-fingered son.

"An' that ain't all. He . . . say, you remember that day you an' he had that wrestle in my lane?"

"Yeh?"

"Well, he was on his way over to make a deal with me then. Somehow he'd got wind that I was buyin' me a threshin' rig."

Pier raised a red brow. "Threshin' rig?"

"Yep." Ol' Spit Triggs spat and the spittoon spanged. "What's the use a you guys being threshed out by an outsider? Should keep the profits t'home, you know. Besides, my ol' stinkpot renderin' works wasn't makin' me a livin' no more."

"Judas Priest," Pier ejaculated. "The world sure is goin' to rack an' ruin. Everybody's buyin', expandin', reformin'. Why, it's gettin' so a man don't know who owns what around here."

Red Joe said slyly, "Maybe Ol' Spit here wants to run the scale. So he kin cheat us comin' an' goin'."

Ol' Spit Triggs shook off the remark. "Well, so here we are with our hands tied behind our backs."

Pier looked down the line of blue-bearded faces. The sunflower-seed spitters looked back blankly. Stephan Memek appeared even more dumb. Pier glanced at Herman Brackx, who was leaning over the bar picking his teeth. "Wal, Herman, ye're a member of the city council, can't you do something?"

"Nuthin'. We can't veto the mayor, you know. No, you can't budge him if he won't be budged."

Pier shook his head, bewildered. "What gets me is how this bum, this no-good, who yesterday couldn't a got the job a carrying our slop to the hogs . . . how this guy is so all of a sudden rich. Where's he get the sudden money?"

"I dunno. Nobody knows. But he's got it. He's probably inherited a wad a dough from England again."

"Herman, how about you runnin' that scale fer us durin' threshin' season?"

"Can't. Got this place here."

"Let yer wife run it."

"An' ruin my business?" Herman Brackx paused. "No, the way I see it, he's got you boys where the hair is short. An' he's got you right."

The red-faced Grimovich boys nodded. "Sss-pitch. Yip, that's right," said Otto.

"Sss-peteh," agreed Peter.

"Sss-puteh," spat George emphatically.

"Aw, hell," Pier said, scratching his red hair. "Aw, hell. The only thing to do is to go in there an' ask the bastard if he intends to cheat

us. What're we afraid of? I've had dealin's with him an' he ain't so tough. There's more than one way to skin a baboon's ass."

The men laughed. Grinning, they slupped from their mugs of foaming beer. Some rolled cigarettes, some lighted pipes.

Red Joe wondered, "The rough stuff won't make him worse, will it?"

"Aw, hell no. I know his kind. Straight talk works best with them. Tell you what I'll do. I've got some business with him anyway this afternoon and I'll ask him straight off just what he means by hirin' Weasel Willie."

Ol' Spit Triggs shook his head. "I'm afraid it won't do no good."

Pier clapped out his pipe in the palm of his hand, dropped the little hard curd of tobacco into the spittoon. "Wal, we'll see." He left.

He stepped down the two plank steps and crossed the street. He walked through the side door of the blacksmith-implement shop. The murky, ash-strewn smithy was on his right, the implements on the left.

He heard familiar voices in back, and walking around two new cultivators, a new harvester, a shining yellow-and-green gang plow, came upon Blacktail and a sleek stranger.

Blacktail turned easily. He was lively and his cheeks glowed. A shrewd gleam had replaced the old sardonic glint in his gray eyes. "Hello, Frixen."

"Hi." Pier stepped up slowly.

"Anything I can do for you?"

"Yeh. Could I see you private a minute when ye're done with him?"

"Sure. I can see you right now." Blacktail turned to the bland-faced stranger. "I'll be right back."

Pier followed Blacktail. They entered a dark, oily office.

"Here, take a chair, Frixen."

"Thanks. Say, I don't want to take you away from something important."

"Oh, he can wait. He's only a salesman. Got time to burn."

"Oh."

"Well, what can I do for you?"

Pier said, "Puddicombe, I'm a blunt man. I'll tell you straight out. The boys think you've hired Willie to cheat us."

Blacktail coughed softly. "So the boys think I'm going to mink them, huh? And of all people, with Weasel Willie."

"That's right."

"What do you think?"

"I have no idea. I'm waitin' for what you have to say."

Blacktail nodded. "Pier, you tell the boys to name me the man they want. And I'll see to it that the scale is run according to the Golden Rule."

Pier narrowed his eyes, watching, wondering.

To his astonishment, when he began to dicker with Blacktail on the prices of cultivators and milk separators, he found him fair. He began to wonder if Ol' Spit Triggs had made up that story about the deal.

A month later, the farmers and Blacktail agreed on Âlde Folkwâlda as the official city weighmaster.

Pier, sniffing, a little surprised that Blacktail had actually backed down, pondered where the man would strike next.

· 3 ·

Clear days. The July sun spread warmly over the land. The shocked grain cured quickly and well.

The landsmen opened their eyes. They watched the clouds and the winds for good omens, the sunrise and sunset.

Pier finished his cutting and shocking just as July ran out. He promptly joined Ol' Spit Triggs's new threshing ring.

Through the first week of August the skies continued to stay clear. The mornings came without dew. Fields were rapidly swept of their shocks.

When the threshers came to Pier's yard the first week in August, he still found himself short of help. Before he could send the grain wagons rolling to Starum to take advantage of the fabulously high war prices that summer, he had to fill his feedbins. He had no elevator and so had to scoop it off by hand. For that job he had only himself and Red Joe.

At nine-thirty in the morning, with three hours of steady scooping already behind them, the two men were still furiously bending, heaving, grunting, and sinking away into the soft sliding mounds

of oats in the wagon. The summer had suddenly opened around them with a blast of heat and, despite the north shade of the granary, the two men sweat copiously. Sweat soaked through their shirts and overalls, even penetrated the double thickness of the suspenders X-ing across their backs.

Just west of the granary and out of sight, the old steamer puffed and rolled on its huge, lugged rear wheels. Sometimes chaff and straw dust from the separator blower a hundred yards away swirled around the corner of the granary and tickled the throats of the men and stuffed their nostrils. Pier's blacks, Colonel and Topsy, waiting before the wagon, stood resting on two legs, a front and a rear. Their wet backs and the brown harnesses slowly yellowed with flying litter. They switched lazily at the nagging flies.

"Hocus-pocus Pilatus," Pier gasped, after they had thrown off half the load without a stop, "let's catch our winds." He leaned on his shovel.

"Suits me," said bowlegged Red Joe, puffing, and instantly slumping against the side of the green wagon.

Pier pulled his legs out of the oats. They had been settling steadily. He shook one foot, then the other. He curled up his toes. Oats had trickled into the shoes and his feet felt thick. "Man, that's what I call work," he grunted, breathing heavily.

"You kin say that again." Red Joe sucked in his cheeks, rolled his tongue around, bunched his lips, spat a heavy spurt of tobacco juice to one side. He looked longingly at the dark shade of the nearby grove.

Pier panted.

Red Joe hunted through his pocket until he found a plug of tobacco. He brushed off the pocket dirt encrusted on its surface and carefully bit off a piece. Slowly he crunched the hard leaves between his yellow teeth. "Want a bite?"

"No. Thanks."

"Keeps yer teeth in good shape."

"I know. Thanks just the same."

"An' yer bowels free."

Pier laughed.

Red Joe chewed a moment; then jerked up. "Say, ain't that yer old man, comin' there with one a the Brandt boys?"

Pier looked past the woodshed. An empty grain wagon was re-

turning from town, coming over the east horizon. Two figures were on it. "Say, that does look like Pa at that. Wonder what he wants? A couple a weeks ago he bucked comin' here."

In a few moments the returning wagon rolled onto the yard. It stopped out of sight behind the granary.

Âlde Romke came around the corner, his short legs hobbled by pants worn too low at the crotch.

Pier swallowed and decided to make the first move. "Hi, Pa."

Âlde Romke stopped beside the wagon and looked up. "Well, Greate, how is it?"

Red Joe stopped chewing. He sat as quiet as a cat, watching the two. Only his eyes moved.

"Pretty good."

"Huh."

Pier didn't know what to say next, so he blurted the first thing that came to mind. "Well, how's life?"

"Oh, thin in spots, but it goes on."

"Uh-huh. That's what it does all right."

"How's it grain running?"

"Good. Pretty good, considerin'. Around fifty to the acre."

"You don't mean it."

"Yeh."

The old man looked off to one side. He growled something to himself. Then, hitching up his trousers, he climbed onto the wagon wheel and leaned over the edge. He reached into the mounds of oats and picked up a handful, fingering and feeling the prickly grain. "So. Well."

"Afraid I might be doin' it wrong?"

"Nou, nou, bidimje. It's good."

Red Joe slowly relaxed and began to chew his quid again.

Pier ran his hand up and down the shiny worn handle of his scoop. With a sudden breath he said, "Wal, Pa, if you wanna be used, I kin use y'u."

Alde Romke became sly. "Oh. So. Well, as ik kin, dan sil ik dy helpe."

Pier thought a moment, half-mindedly watching the blacks switch their tails at the whizzing flies. "I tell you what, Pa, just as soon as I get this bin full, I'd like to put you in charge a sendin' the grain to town. You see, I'm gettin' a helluva price fer the oats this year.

An' I figure it's better sellin' it direct than to feed it an' haul it off the yard on foot."

Âlde Romke stroked his red-gray beard. "Maybe you're right, soan."

"Yeh. Anyway, I want somebody to keep an eye on Spit. He ain't cheated nobody yit, but, just the same, I think I'll have somebody watch him."

"Spit?"

"Yeh. Now that he's a big-time operator, he's liable to be like the rest of 'em. Out to squeeze us all he can. So, watchin' him will be a good job for y'u. Meantime, I kin get out the rack an' haul bundles. We only got seven teams an' that's workin' a hardship on three of 'em."

Âlde Romke nodded. He picked up another handful of oats, flupped it up and down in his hand a few times, felt it, weighed it, dropped it.

"Is that okay, Pa?"

"Ae. It's awright fine." Âlde Romke picked up another handful of grain, tested it. "Joseph, do you know you're looking at oats? Prize oats?"

Red Joe nodded. "It ain't bad atall."

"Ae. Prize oats. Perfect good. Better than I ever raised. Wo'dammit."

Pier grinned. He coughed. "Thanks, Pa."

Âlde Romke grunted. He looked around, rolled his eyes, asked, "You boys had lunch yet?"

"No."

"Good. I can stand some home-baked bread again."

"They should be here any minute."

"They?" Âlde Romke quirked a brushy brow. "Nertha got help?"

"Yeh. Kaia."

"Kaia? Her?"

"Sure."

"Why her?"

Again Red Joe stilled. His eyes darted from one to the other.

"Why, to help Nertha of course. I'm not lettin' my old lady wear herself down to white beans. Besides, she was the only one I could get."

"You could ha' much better got the wife of the devil."

Pier shrugged. "Wal, maybe so."

"Ma Lysbeth ain't good enough, is she?"

"Why, to tell you the truth," Pier said, his voice suddenly hardening, "I don't think she'd a come if I'd a asked her. Now would she?"

Âlde Romke looked to one side. "But Kaia's no woman to be let around your wife."

"Since when've you become so lovin' a Nertha?"

"That's not the point. It's that Kaia ain't no good. She's a hex. A seguener. Why, she's so full a sin she leaves ashes in her footprints."

"Oh, horse collar."

"Ae," the old man craked, "but I wit better, soan."

"Aw, nuts."

Once again Red Joe sat watching them with covert eyes.

"Even Âlde Folkwâlda agrees she's a whore."

"What of it? As long as she turns out good cookies, that's all that counts with me. Besides, Pa, my wife's got gut trouble an' I ain't lettin' her work too hard."

"It pendix?"

"No. Not that. We don't know what it is. She seems to have trouble goin'. Sometimes it's a week."

Âlde Romke nodded, as if a propheey had been confirmed in his mind.

"Now, don't you go blowin' around 'I told you so.' I won't stand for it. She's a good woman. An' this winter, she may surprise us all."

Âlde Romke jumped. "What? Has she got a bern under the apron?"

Pier grinned. "Yep. Comin' sometime in January, I guess."

Red Joe's eyes opened. He smiled too.

"Ae, a grandchild! 'N bernsbern!"

"Yeh, that's right."

"'N bernsbern. Little Romke."

"Wal, I ain't so sure about the name yit, Pa. Say, they're quittin'," Pier said suddenly, glad to shift to something else. "Yup. Time for lunch. Let's finish off this load quick, Red Joe, an' then we'll fill up too."

Âlde Romke, still ecstatically exclaiming to himself, climbed down and left them.

The two men bent to their work again.

Pier dipped his mirror-bright scoop into the wallowing oats, lifted, swung, shot it toward the grain hole just as Red Joe's scoop returned. With a quick jerk, Pier pulled up on his heave. Like a mass of bees, a solid cloud of flying oats went sailing into the dark interior of the granary.

The two swung their scoops in rhythm, the one following the other, their feet settling into the shifting piles of grain. Dip, lift, jerk. And swish. The movements were the strokes of a song, Pier thought. If he had not been so out of breath he would have sung it.

They finished. Slowly driving the blacks around the west side of the granary, he came upon the steam engine. He stopped the horses behind its left great wheel.

He climbed down with Red Joe and joined the circle, sitting on his heels with other gossiping, chewing threshers: Otto Grimovich, Ol' Spit Triggs, Alde Romke. Red Joe tongued his quid of tobacco carefully into his hand and laid it on the toe of his shoe.

Nertha, her silver hair crowned by a wide straw hat, stood like a queen over a wide dishpan of sandwiches and cake and a towering pot of coffee. As each newcomer joined the circle, she waved the flies away and, quickly lifting the dishcloth, let each hungry man reach in for a sandwich. Then, holding the lid on the pot, with a pointed finger and thumb, she filled his cup.

The steamer sighed behind them. Water trickled over its bulges and down its fat belly, leaving trails of yellow rust. Little puddles of water slowly widened in its shadow, soaking the smelly dog fennel. The low mallow, growing wild on the ground and showing ribbed, miniature-pumpkinlike seeds, wilted. Steam issued with a singing hiss from the whistle and valve; it smelled like boiled onion. Sometimes the old engine hiccuped.

The air was sweet with the dusty aroma of cracked grain and ruffled straw. The sweat smells of men were tangy.

The men munched and talked. Sometimes their words were half lost in bread and dried beef.

"Pretty good grub," Red Joe remarked after a moment, winking at Ol' Spit Triggs.

Nertha smiled and dipped her hat to hide her pleasure. She stood up and held her hands over her slightly outthrust belly.

"Yeh, pretty good," continued Red Joe, a sly smile working the

corners of his eyes. "Good. Damn sight better'n what you birds'll get when we thresh at my place tomorry."

Pier filled his mouth with a huge bite and sipped at his cup of coffee to moisten the dry mass and grunted, "Oh?"

"Yep. My dog et up all my dried beef. So all I got left is some dried-up a'terbirths."

"Red Joe!" Nertha gasped. "Such talk!"

"Sure. I'll tell my wife to throw 'em in the horse tank tonight to soften 'em up a little for you boys. Though they're still liable to be tougher'n leather."

Nertha shook her head. "I'll bet you don't talk that way around Edna."

Red Joe shrugged and winked. The men laughed and coughed in their food.

Pier said, smiling, "Wal, Nertha, if you don't like men's talk, you know what y'u kin do."

She said nothing.

Ol' Spit Triggs, finishing the last of his coffee, hauled out a plug of tobacco, bit off a hunk, and chawed vigorously. He scratched himself, and said, "You know, by God, if I didn't have lice, I'd think I had 'em."

No one laughed.

Ol' Spit Triggs spat out a few crumbs of pocket dirt that his exploring tongue tip had found, and said, "Wimmen, wimmen. They got way too much to say about how men should live an' talk. By God, that's why I never give my wife Gert a chance to get on top. I keep her knocked up in the summer, an' take her shoes away from her in the winter."

Nertha hid her face behind her straw hat. Her hand slowly tightened over the handle of the coffeepot. She stood stiffly.

Ol' Spit Triggs smiled until his face seemed wider than it was deep. "Say, Nertha, I told Gert to drive over and help y'u make dinner. She come yit?"

"No."

"Well, she'll come," he said grimly.

Nertha turned to Pier. "I don't think you need me any more, do you, Pier?"

"Why . . . I don't think so. Sure. Go if you got other work to do," Pier said kindly.

Glancing once more at the pan of sandwiches and the coffeepot, she started for the house. She walked slowly. The child was beginning to weigh on her.

Red Joe offered, "Yep, a man's got to keep a wife in place. Sure, it's good to love 'em up now and then, but when they get too quick, y'u gotta beat 'em up." He finished the last of his cake and coffee, sucked his teeth, picked up the brown cud of tobacco from the toe of his shoe. "It's a damned funny thing, but when y'u see yer wife stiddy every day, she gets to be about as welcome as vomit. But don't see her fer a while, and keep from doin' it, an' yer nose will lead you right back. You know, sometimes I think men and women was never meant fer marriage. That it's just a trick a nature to get some kids out a us."

"Now, now," Âlde Romke broke in, "that's blasphemy."

Red Joe rocked on his heels, chewing slowly. "Well, I've given it my thought, an' that's the way it ties up fer me."

"If that's so, then I've been doing something wrong all my life," Âlde Romke protested.

Ol' Spit Triggs spat a brown stream to one side and chuckled. "There ain't no doubt about it."

"Ae, well . . ." Âlde Romke's voice trailed off.

Pier ate his cake, drank his coffee. He turned the talk over in his mind. It was true that women seemed to change. Take Nertha. Her true nature was just now coming to the top, like cream on milk; or like scum on water, depending on which way a man looked at it. Sometimes she was sweet and wanted him to be a dude and sing to her; sometimes she was sharp and selfish and made sure that she wasn't being cheated out of anything life might offer.

A passing breeze swept in among the men and they tipped back their straw hats to catch the cool air on their brows.

Pier turned to Otto Grimovich. Otto's face had been burned to a beet red in the sun. "Otto, you bein' a bachelor, maybe you got some idees about this."

Otto brushed a fly from his crumbling cake and said, "Don't mean nothin' to me. No wimmen, no ideas."

Red Joe, his eyes covert again, asked, "Which one a you brothers washes the dishes?"

"Nobody. On Sundays we just call in the dog and he licks 'em all clean." Otto looked solemnly around the circle. He swung back

and forth on his heels. His huge, bull frame bulked up stubbornly beside Pier.

"Don't you ever get lonesome for a woman?"

"Sometimes." Otto added quietly, "Our people was tricked into comin' here t'Ameriky, an' we don't believe in giving children to a land that's tricked us."

Âlde Romke looked up from his crouch. "Tricked. How so?"

"Well," said Otto slowly, eying each man in the circle as if he were about to tell a secret he knew might forever alienate them, "well, it's this way. You see, my people, they was livin' t'Germany. They was livin' in peace, an' servin' the Lord. An' then, all of a sudden, the persecutions started. Well, Katreen of Russia, she invited us over there. To live in the Ukreen. Well, my people packed up and went. But pretty soon the persecutions started in Russia too. By that time I was a boy, an' I remember it well. We were like dogs, beaten. So then when high-pressure salesmen came from Ameriky, tellin' us about what a wonderful place this was, with wonderful houses, our wimmen, my mother, they was wild to come. You see, them houses they talked about, they was wonderful. They showed us pictures. They made promises. So we went. But when our wimmen saw the prairie, empty, with no houses, nothing, why, they went crazy. Mad. It was against all reason, against God even, to lie so."

"Couldn't you build?"

Otto shook his head. "Sure. But that ain't it. It was that we was tricked. Cheated. An' we ain't forgivin' that."

Pier said nothing.

Red Joe said, "Aw, I bet a buck it's because you boys don't dare to whoop the wimmen."

Otto ignored him. "And I'm glad a war's come along so no more of our people could come."

Pier said, "Otto, you better forget that now. Our guv'ment's touchy these days, an' if somebody hears y'u talkin' like this, it'll string y'u up."

"I know."

"Get yerself a wife, man, Yer still young. Only thirty five, ain't you?"

"That I am. But I ain't afraid of talkin'." He eyed each man steadily. He reached into his pocket for a handful of sunflower

seeds. In a moment his lips began to twist and roll. "Sss-piteh. Besides, Pier, what about that seining your old man does in the Big Sioux? Ain't that a form a bein' agin the guv'ment?"

Pier started. Otto had hit. Had hit closer than he probably intended. Pier himself was partially guilty. On a number of occasions he had shared in Âlde Romke's hauls.

Âlde Romke paled too. The old man's fingers scrabbled nervously in the dirt at his feet.

Pier returned to his own thoughts. The steamer rumbled and sighed behind him. It was good just to sit in its shade.

He finished his cake and licked his fingers. He rinsed his mouth with a swallow of coffee.

Two loads of bundles came onto the yard, driven by the lean Brandt boys. The youths eased up to the separator, got off, joined the circle. Sweaty, ravenous, wordless, they began to gulp food.

Ol' Spit Triggs asked, "Pier, how do you like the threshin' job?"

"Fair. I went behind the blower a while ago, an' there wasn't much grain comin' through."

"Aw, don't compliment the old buzzard," Red Joe said. "You know damned well his old coffee grinder couldn't chew mush."

"You say that about a Titan?" Ol' Spit Triggs challenged. "A Titan's a damned fine machine."

"Titan, Minneapolis, they're all the same, ain't they?"

"Hell no. I wouldn't take a dozen a yer Minneapolis machines fer a Titan."

"Aw, it's the old fable of six of a kind against a half dozen of the other."

"Ho no, it's not."

The talk touched off Âlde Romke. "There's one thing about it," he observed, lighting his pipe, "there ain't a machine made that's as smart as the hand of man."

Ol' Spit Triggs mumbled to himself.

Âlde Romke went on. "We're inventing too many machines. We're making everything too complicated. Farms are getting to be like factories. An' it's wrong. Be much better if we'd stick to it hoes an' horses."

Ol' Spit Triggs spat and laughed. "Hell, hoes. How many acres a corn do you think you could hoe a day?"

"That ain't it point. It point is——"

Otto broke in, clearing his teeth noisily. "Well, I'm for machines. The quicker we get them, the quicker we'll all belong to one big co-op. I tell you, the co-op is the coming thing. And the Farmers' Union. People are gettin' tired a workin' like lone dogs."

"Wo'dammit, but I like working alone."

Otto turned on Alde Romke and bored his eyes into him. "Why ain't you threshing alone then?"

"Well, Pier is running the farm now," Âlde Romke answered lamely.

"Huh. What the hell do you think this threshing ring is, if it ain't a co-op? Hell, without knowing it, you was already in a co-op."

"Good boy, Otto," Ol' Spit Triggs exclaimed.

Red Joe asked, "Otto, do you belong to the I.W.W.?"

"What if I do? Ain't the truth the truth?"

Red Joe chewed slowly. "You sure ain't afraid a airin' yer mind, are you?"

"Why should I be?"

"I ain't sayin' it's wrong. I like it. Go ahead. But be careful. It's like Pier here says. Some people got long ears."

Otto growled and spat the shell of a sunflower seed in a neat parabola over Red Joe's head.

Red Joe added, "It's a good thing you an' yer brothers made a lot a dough, Otto. That makes you safe."

Pier watched the two, saying nothing, lighting his pipe and rocking on his heels.

Âlde Romke made another peck at the passing talk. "Machines. Why, one of these days they'll be inventing a corn-picking machine."

Ol' Spit laughed. "They have."

"I suppose it'll pick up the loose ears from the ground?" Âlde Romke scoffed.

"Leave it to the inventors to figger out a way. They'll do it."

"Huh. I got to see that first."

Pier puffed on his pipe, only half listening. He had again become aware of the steamer behind him. Ahead the grain separator waited between two loads of bundles. "Wal, boys, don't y'u think we better get goin' agin? Time is leanin' into noon already."

"Yeh."

"Ungh. Yeh."

"Yeh."

Groaning, the men stood up. Âlde Romke carefully stamped out the hot coals from his pipe. Pier emptied his beside the rear wheel where rusty, yellow water had been dripping steadily.

Ol' Spit Triggs crawled onto a small wagon loaded with coal and water and began to refuel the steamer.

Otto came up to Pier. "You gonna haul bundles too, Pier?"

"Yeh."

"Guess you'll be my partner then."

"Yeh. But I first got to throw off another load of grain."

"You'll never get your load of bundles up in time."

"The hell I won't."

Otto shrugged.

"Don't worry. I'll be there. With a load, too."

"Like them loads my brother Pete hauls?"

Pier looked directly into Otto's challenging eyes. Peter was the black sheep of the threshing ring; he usually came in with the smallest loads and the loudest complaints. "Wal, sir, I tell you what I'll do. I'll count bundle for bundle with you."

Otto smiled softly. "Will you bet on it?"

"I'll bet a sack of my grain against a sack of yer'n."

"Good." Otto swung up to his rack and drove off.

Both Ol' Spit Triggs and Red Joe were grinning, rubbing their hands. There would be a race. The slim Brandt boys, climbing onto their loads, smiled.

Ol' Spit Triggs jerked the whistle cord then and in a moment Dirty-shirt Schultz, the separator man, appeared from out of the bowels of the machine. He had been greasing while the men ate lunch. He waved a go-ahead signal. The steamer reared, exploded huge puffs of dark smoke straight up. The driving piston slugged inside its grooved course like a boxer trying to learn a certain punch. The long flopping drive belt twisted and wriggled. The separator began to tremble and sing. The two Brandt boys began to pitch off their loads.

Pier waved at Red Joe to hurry and the two men went off to unload the grain wagon.

When Pier drove his blacks out to the big fifty east of the house, the brassy sun was burning hard on the golden stubbles. He stood

balancing on the board bottom of the bouncing rack, holding the lines with one hand and leaning on his three-tine fork with the other.

Here and there wart growths of wild ground cherries spread yellow cuplike flowers over the earth. Awkward creeping Charlies grew in irregular patches. A thin stand of foxtail grew everywhere.

Two inches of fine gray-brown dust streamed in the fresh track down which the bundle haulers had driven their loads all morning. A swirl of it blew up behind Pier's wagon. It churned up underneath the wagon, around his trousers, around his belly, around his face. His skin browned. Part of the color was a barberry rust; there had been a touch of it, though not enough to damage the crop.

The south end of the field was almost cleared away. A few long windrows still stood over the hill, in the southeast corner. Alongside one of them a man was loading swiftly. Pier studied the figure, decided it was his partner Otto. Pier swung his horses to the right, cutting a new track through the stubbles. He selected a long windrow for himself.

The sun burned. It dried his soaked shirt.

Otto's wagon was almost loaded. A four-bundle-thick layer loomed over the sides. Otto needed only another row all around, and the middle full, and he could go. Pier gritted his teeth. It was a good thing Otto always made it a practice to get to the yard a good ten minutes before the load ahead was off; it was his way of getting periodic rests through the day. That ten minutes would give Pier just enough leeway to get his load on in time. But it would be a hard race.

He stopped the horses. With a sweep of his arm he hooked the lines over the rack ladder up front. He threw the pitchfork over the side. Before the sun-glinting tines, shooting through the air like three golden arrows, could hit the ground, he was after it, vaulting and falling lightly to earth.

He giddaped the horses into a slow walk, began heaving bundles. Often he caught a whole shock at a throw, six bundles, hurtling them up over the side of the rack, tumbling them butt end over head end, pell-mell, into the bottom below. Sometimes he caught only four bundles at a time, leaving two for an extra throw.

He worked. He jumped. He leaped. He turned and twisted. He

lifted and hurled. Sweat burst from him in great beads. He hurried forward, clucking his horses ahead.

He had gone twenty shocks down the row when Colonel reached for a shock. The horse had managed to brush off a wire nose basket worn as a protection against nose flies.

Pier geysered anger. "Hey, damn you, get back in line there." He whacked the horse with the flat of his fork.

Colonel started guiltily, drew back.

"That's it. There. And take it easy." Pier fixed on the nose basket again. "There. Now. Giddap."

Both horses went on and once more Pier caught up whole shocks at a throw.

Sometimes his fork stuck fast in a bundle thick with wild sunflower and thick-stemmed burdock. Cursing, and jerking, and stabbing again, he threw it up with a violent heave.

Sometimes rosebushes, studded with orange-ripe berries, caught at the hilt of the fork.

A prickle slipped under the nail of his forefinger. It throbbed slowly. It stabbed him each time the slick fork handle brushed over it.

His hands burned. The hard calluses became hot pads. Sweat ran down his ankles, trickling into his shoes. His feet slurked and sucked inside the leather. The overall on his knees stuck to his skin. In the quiet, windless air, breathing was difficult, close. His head began to turn.

"By God, you're a reg'lar whirlwind, Pier," a voice said.

Pier looked up so quickly his floppy straw hat almost slipped off. He caught at it and, sighing, recognized Otto. "Judas t'Priest. I see I'm at the end of the row already."

"Yeh. One more shock."

Pier glanced at his wagon. "Wal, rack's full too. Now for the sides." He glanced at Otto's load, towering near by. "Land alive, man, you sure got a load on that one. What're y'u tryin' to do, haul the whole crop home at once?"

"Huh. Wait'll I'm finished," Otto murmured, leaning on his fork, smiling. His quiet, pigeon-blue eyes twinkled. His blond-red face and red neck shone with sweat.

"Yeh, an' break yer ex."

Otto glanced at the wooden wheels of his rack. "Them are pretty

good axles, Pier. Best there is. I reckon I kin put on a couple more shocks and make a load out of it."

"Y'u ain't gonna give me much of a chance, are y'u?"

"Well, I like to load 'em full."

Pier's breath began to come more evenly and he said, "Wal, I guess I better swing into it again if I want to make it to the machine in time."

As Otto started for his rack, he called over his shoulder, "Remember, we're countin' the bundles."

"I ain't fergettin', mister."

Pier started up the next windrow. He began to work more carefully. Catching two bundles at a time below the twine-string binding, and lifting and swinging them over his head, he planted them, heads in and butts out, along the edge of the rack. The butts stuck out over the edge about the length of a hand. Slowly he worked around the rack, sometimes on the left side, sometimes on the right. The mass of bundles began to lift above him like a fantastically huge mushroom rising out of the earth. The wheels groaned and cracked beneath the weight. Their rims cut into the earth. When he urged the horses on, they had to lean heavily into their traces.

He kept the middle full to keep the outer edges from falling in. The bundles slanted toward the center, and downward slightly, the weight of them leaning toward the middle of the load.

The soft earth sank beneath his stamping feet. The flesh of the earth was pliant. He had the feeling that the hill he was working on was the breast of an enormous woman.

When Pier came to the end of the second windrow, Otto was already heading for the yard. The lofty rackful of bundles rolled slowly down the sloping hill. It was a cloud settling on the western horizon.

Pier glanced at his own wagon. One more windrow would do it; and to make sure, he would throw up another half row.

He worked shrewdly, judging the weights of the sides, turning the blacks first to one side of the windrow, then to the other, making sure that the sides came up evenly, that they would not slip out or slip inward. Every inch counted now. Every corner had to carry its bulge. Gradually the bulk swelled, five, six, seven, eight feet above the sides of the rack.

The horses lay down to pull. Their great thigh and rump muscles

bulged like giant biceps. Their belly muscles jerked and tightened. Air spat from their rumps. Slowly the wheels revolved, grooved deep ruts into the soft gray-brown soil.

At the end of the third windrow, Pier stopped a second to look over the field. A ways down, the two Brandt boys who followed him in the line-up were already at it. In a moment they too would begin their sides. Pier hurried to work, herding the horses with his fork to the fourth row.

He worked the bundles up carefully. The load became so fat, so high, so completely rounded at the top, that a good share of the bundles he threw up began to tumble down on the other side.

He was proud of the load. It was a masterpiece of loading. True, a rack usually held about so many bundles. But a good loader could always get on those extra few that made his load the biggest. This was one of them. It was a great load. One that farmers hereabouts would not easily forget.

A third of the way down the fourth row, he stopped. The last six bundles, even though he had thrown them up individually, had come flopping down on his head, spilling oat kernels into his shirt at the neck and filling his open mouth with chaff and dust and barberry rust.

It was done. He looked up admiringly. With his sleeve he wiped sweat from his eyes. It was a wonderful fine load. Yessir. Wal, now to get the monster home.

He climbed up behind the horses, brushing straw and oats and chaff out of his eyes as he worked his way up the ladder. When he came to the top of it, he unhooked the lines and, catching them loosely over his shoulder, pushed himself upward. Even when he stood tiptoe on the very top of the ladder, the bundles still towered over him. He stuck his fork blindly into the bundles ahead. Cautiously he drew himself up, using his anchored fork as a drawbar. With a bulge of muscle, he fell forward into the center of the load.

Once on top, he walked over it like a cat, using his fork like a paw to spread out the bundles, arranging them evenly, anchoring every other one. The great load beneath him stirred like a small earth. He trembled with delight.

He started up the horses. At first the load teetered dangerously. He held his breath. It righted. And in a moment the horses had it moving along the ground. It crawled along like an overgrown,

rumbling beetle. Slowly the great load began to trundle and bumble along.

He drove the horses carefully. He picked his route over the uneven ground. It was like teaching a monstrous child to walk for the first time.

Each time the rear wheels and axles groaned distantly beneath him, he stiffened and waited apprehensively. Each time the load rolled on its crossbars, and the reach crackled beneath him, he prayed that the running gear would hold until he had reached the yard. The men had to see this masterpiece. It was the biggest load ever thrown up. And the best balanced. It was a stack on wheels. He whistled. He sang to the horses:

"Pull, boys, pull!
Pull it hard,
Pull it full,
Pull it to the yard.
Pull, and grunt again.
Pull, and go again.
Pull. Pull! PULL!"

The great mass moved down the hill like a slow avalanche. He neared the hard tracks behind the grove. He watched for drops in the dusty path. With sibilant sounds he called encouragingly to the groaning blacks.

He sat warmly nestled in the bundles. His body sank slowly into the load, like a porous log settling into water. Stiff oat stalks crackled and moved around him. A crushed bug sent up a strong stench, like a mixture of skunk venom and oil. A grasshopper landed on the point of his nose, its rear legs trembling and stretching, ready to jump. The creature, sitting so close to his crossed eyes, looked like a bridge ready to fly. He brushed it off.

He saw it near the grove. The early summer rains had cut an angling ditch across the path. On either side lay bundles shaken from previous loads. The drivers had bounced through it.

He stopped the horses and got to his feet. He crouched forward to study the hole in the earth. He saw immediately that the right wheel would dip into it before the left. The load would roll; might even tip.

He smiled craftily. He started up the horses and turned them to one side to get a straight shot at it. The front wheels, and the rear, each would drop into the hole as a pair.

He eased up to it. He curbed the horses to a crawl.

He could feel the hole there beneath him. He was at the edge of it. He pushed the wheels over, carefully, and held up the horses tight. The wheels dropped with a thud. The great load quaked. Shivered.

Now for the rear. He started up the horses. They lay down between their traces, groaned, spat air from their rumps again. With a great shouldering budge they slowly drew the front wheels out of the hole. The wagon rolled.

Pier felt around for the hole with his rear wheels. He held his breath. He prayed. He guessed. He held up the horses tight. And the great load suddenly sagged and something cracked loudly in back.

Pier held the horses. He puffed. He sweated. He stood up and wiped his brow. He wondered if the reach had broken. Or if an axle had cracked off. He would know in a moment. When he pulled away.

Once more the horses started ahead. They gathered their muscles together into a wriggling nexus, into a mighty explosion of power. The load soared as if an enormous shoulder had come up underneath it.

Pier looked around, sailorwise holding himself erect on the rolling load. It was coming. Whatever had cracked was still holding together.

He drove around the granary. The wagon ahead was just unloaded. And Otto, after his ten-minute rest in the shade of his load, was just getting to his feet. In a moment he too was on his load and driving into place beside the feeder on the opposite side of the belt.

The feeder was like the mouth of a great alligator. It waited for him, open, red, its tongue the moving slats, slapping, its teeth the sword-long bundle cutters, slashing and closing over each other.

As Pier nonchalantly drove his horses into the belt side, he was aware many eyes were on him. He felt Otto staring at him; saw Ol' Spit Triggs standing stock-still, mouth open, a quid of tobacco lying on his tongue like a crab on a red stone; saw Dirty-shirt Schultz, the separator man, standing just above the eyes of the alligator, shaking his head.

The contest started. Pier and Otto matched bundle for bundle.

Pier peeled off a layer two bundles deep before he settled down to one corner. His eyes became grimy with dust and chaff. Sweat sprinkled from his face; some of the drops, falling on his hand, felt like the first cooling splashes of a sudden summer shower.

From where Pier worked the menacing aspect of the big Titan separator had changed. Now it groaned and lowed. It was a cow being milked of its grain. Legs wide apart, it stood in the midst of an uproar; tail lifted, it blew streaks of straw onto a rising pile.

The big machine hummed. It gobbled and grabbed and chawed the bundles.

Bundle for bundle, crafty eye on cautious eye, Pier and Otto worked down into their loads. Ol' Spit Triggs, the umpire, sat on a rocking rear wheel of the steamer, laughing and chewing.

The edges of the rack began to show. Pier glanced at Otto's rack, wondered if the other's was deeper. If it was, he was beaten.

He worked carefully, hoping, fearing, smiling a little. His fork swung out, caught a bundle, turned it, flipped it, gave it a little kick so that it whirled over in the air and landed head first, butt down, into the wide red feeder where sickle-sharp teeth churned and pounded and devoured.

Sometimes a bundle fell backward and doubled up with another. Then the machine moaned, and the drive belt from the steamer slapped, and the old steamer, surprised at the sudden load, hiccuped and jumped and growled.

The second slat of the rack's side appeared. A corner cleared away. Pier glanced nervously across the feeder. He started. Why! Otto's rack floor was more than half uncovered. He looked quickly at Otto and knew he had won. Otto was smiling sheepishly. Pier waved his fork. Ol' Spit Triggs, spitting mightily, stood up and tooted the shrill whistle. The moment Otto heaved in his last bundle Pier began to count those left on his own wagon. One, two, three. Eleven, twelve, thirteen. Twenty, twenty-one. Thirty, thirty-one. Forty, forty-one. Fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three, fifty-four . . . fifty-five.

"That's it!" Pier shouted. Beaming, he turned to Otto.

Otto reached out a hand over the feeder and the sliding, whining belt. The two shook. "Pretty good," Otto yelled.

"Oh, I was lucky," Pier yelled in answer.

"Any time a man trades off his rest for crazy scooping and still

goes on to win a bundle-pitching contest with me, he's more than lucky. He's good. I'll bring that sack a oats tomorry."

"Aw, skip it. It was fun enough winning."

Once again Ol' Spit Triggs pulled the whistle, this time for dinner.

Âlde Romke came running up. "Soan, do you know how much grain came out of them two loads?"

"No."

"Three triple wainboxes an' a handful."

Pier laughed. "Good. Wal, you better go in to dinner now, Pa. I've got to unhitch these poor critters a mine, an' then water the hogs."

When Pier came up to the house through the barnyard gate, he found Âlde Romke alone under the box elder, smiling to himself. The other threshers had already cleaned up at the outdoor washstand and had gone in to the feast. Pier glanced over the yard, mentally noting the evidences of Nertha's green knuckles: the marigolds beneath the willow, the wild-grape arbor, and the yellow and green and red and purple fruits in the garden.

The old man sighed, still grinning.

"What's the joke, Pa?" Pier asked, rolling up his sleeves and turning under his collar.

"Soan, I can't get over it. I'm going to have a bernsbern."

Pier grinned. "Glad ye're happy."

"Soan, nou haw ik it wurk dien. It calls for a drink. What do you say?"

"Wal, sure. You got some?"

"Ac. The last load I took to town I stopped at the house an' picked up some of my home-brew beer."

"Good." Pier threw his hat into the branches of the box elder. "You should a told me soomer. I could a pervided some ice to cool it."

Âlde Romke pulled a brown pint bottle out of a tub of water. It was a ritual for him. He wiggled his arrow-sharp beard, rolled his eyes.

Pier said, "I suppose the boys went for it."

"Like bees."

Pier smiled. It wasn't often the old man served his home-brew.

A few years ago the old man had read about an old Frisian brew in It Âlde Boek. It was mentioned in a passage describing the custom of serving beer on special occasions. The old man had then and there decided to revive the old formula. After many experiments he finally worked out a good method. And so well did he make his beer that, unlike most brews concocted at home, it never had settlings on the bottom of the bottle. It was as clear as rain water.

Pier drank slowly. The brew had an ashy, quick-biting taste that helped to kill thirst. He smacked his lips. "Pa, I think you better give me the recipe for that. Wow, that's really got flavor. An' a kick like a mule."

"Want another?"

"Sure." Pier took another pint and tipped it and guggled.

"Is it strong enough?"

"Plenty. You know, Pa, ye're gettin' to be a reg'lar heller. A real Big Sioux outlaw."

Âlde Romke pulled up his crotch and sat down. He slapped his knee. "Ae, an' why not. We only got life once."

Pier looked at the thermometer hanging in the shade by the north kitchen window. "Holy horse collar! Did you know it was 116 degrees?"

"Ae."

"No wonder my blood was boilin' all forenoon. A hundred sixteen. Whew. We're lucky nobody died on us this morning. I'm sure gonna tell the boys to take it easy for the rest a the day. A hundred sixteen is too hot for any good use."

Pier picked up a basin of dirty water that a thresher had neglected to empty and heaved its contents over the yard with a sweeping motion. The water, spraying beyond the shadow line of the box elder, caught the sun and sparkled brightly. Pier poured out some fresh, amber-colored rain water. He soaped up his hands into a bubbling, tumbling froth. Leaning over, he buried his face in it. He snorted and worked at cleaning his neck and arms, ears and eyes.

The drink made him dizzy. "Judas t'Priest, Pa, what'd you put in that juice?"

"Nothing. It's the regular stuff. With the regular kick."

"Huh." Pier rinsed the soap off his face and felt blindly around for a towel. He heard Âlde Romke jump up and the next moment felt a towel being pushed into his hands. He clutched at it and

wiped his face. Sweat oozed up as fast as he dried off the water. "Wal, now fer a real feast. I sure kin stand it. Y'u eaten already?"

"No. I'm gonna rest first."

"You ain't holdin' back because a Kaia?"

"Oh no."

Pier picked up an old comb fuzzy with the hair of previous users. Looking into a broken mirror set into the crotch of the box elder, he parted his red hair neatly.

Pier entered the porch, stepped into the kitchen. To his left, in the dining room, burly men sat around a table heaped with mashed and buttered potatoes, wine-red beets, yellow beans, green beans, green peas, fluffy piles of lettuce soaked in oil dressing, young green white-root onions, bowls of fat syrupy gravy, and towers of sliced white bread. Wide plates of pie and saucers of fruit had been set to the right of each plate. Coffee steamed up from individual cups. Milk gleamed in clear glasses. Small jars bristled with clean, yellow pine toothpicks.

The threshers were eating heartily, their brown arms working over the table like pistons. Their hair was combed back, revealing foreheads the more white because of sun-fired cheeks.

Except for Ol' Spit Triggs, who sat glowering over his filled plate, they were all laughing at Slop-hole Gertie, and at Red Joe, who sat baiting her as he ate.

She was sitting on the horsehair sofa, legs spread, and her faded gray house dress drawn halfway up her fat legs, revealing a tubby calf bulging with a tumble of snake-sized varicose veins. She was a pale blonde. She was almost toothless, and her cheeks were flushed. She was pregnant. Looking at her, Pier shivered and wondered how even so dirty a man as Ol' Spit Triggs could stand her longer than a night.

Red Joe, rolling his eyes, and pointing the gravy-wet tips of his fork at her, remarked, "Say, Spit, from the looks a things, I see you let yer wife run around with her shoes on last winter."

Ol' Spit Triggs bulked up his massive shoulders. With beady eyes he looked directly at Red Joe. "You know, if I was you, I'd try to remember that a guy by the name a Triggs was gonna thresh me next. Because a guy by the name a Triggs is just as like as not to open up the shakers and let yer oats fly straight into the straw pile."

Slop-hole Gertie looked dumbly from one to the other.

The threshers circling the table watched silently, chewing.

Red Joe shrugged and turned to Slop-hole Gertie again. "How many kids you got by this time, Gert? I ain't been keepin' track lately."

"Oh, I don't know. A half duzen, maybe," she said with a heavy Scandinavian accent. She turned her eyes inward, as if counting.

Red Joe laughed. "You remind me of the feller what got a baby boy oncet. The only name he could think of was his own. So he named his boy Pete. Well, pretty soon he got another boy. He was quite surprised, and downright puzzled, because he couldn't think of a single name but his own. But finally, at last, he thought of one and named him Repeat. And then, by God, he got another one. A third boy. Well sir, then he was stumped. He puzzled and puzzled. He run around for a half year, trying to think of a name."

Slop-hole Gertie followed the story with open mouth.

"Yeh, well, what happened?" asked Dirty-shirt Schultz.

"Why, he finally settled for Repeater."

The dining room crashed with thresher laughter.

Slop-hole Gertie said, still with a wondering look in her eye, and counting her fingers, "Ya, it's exzactly six." She looked at Joe with interest. "Six. Yee viz, you know, by golly, I'm beginning to believe maybe it vuz a guud thing I got marriet vhen I did, because you kin see for yourself I vuz yust chuck-full a babies."

This time Pier joined the blatting roar.

Slop-hole Gertie looked around, half bewildered that she should have caused so much merriment, half laughing in an effort to take credit for it.

"Gert!" Ol' Spit Triggs suddenly bellowed. "Ain't Nertha got nothin' fer you to do?"

She stood up hastily, pulling down her corset. Her sweated dress had become stuck into her behind and she pulled it free. "Sure."

"Well, then, goddammit, get busy."

She rumbled toward the kitchen, her blue eyes sullen. Pier stepped aside to let her pass.

The next moment someone else brushed against him and he turned, expecting to see Nertha. But it was Kaia.

Smiling, she asked, "Hungry?" Her fingers were hot on his forearm.

"I sure am. I could eat a horse, hide an' all."

Her black, merry eyes shone. She was a full-sized woman, coming almost to his shoulder. Her bosom was full, and heavier than Nertha's. Her arms rippled with slim hard muscles. Her gold earrings clinked. A tangerine kerchief bound her Indian-black hair into a tight cowl around her face. The blue stone rings on her fingers were the color of robin eggs. Her dress was of dark purple, and daringly short, coming to half the height of her calves. She had a narrow waist and stood swinging easily on moccasined feet. Sweat beads ran down her forehead.

Pier said, "Fer a minute I thought sure you was the wife."

"Sorry I ain't?"

"Wal, I dunno. I . . ." He recalled the morning he had picked up Blacktail near her lane, and bit his lip.

Again someone brushed against him. This time there was anger in the touch. It was Nertha. He glanced guiltily at her. He looked from one to the other, muttered, "Guess I'll eat." He hurried to a chair at the far end of the table. His face burned.

The men had not noticed him. They were still noisily loading in food, telling raw ones, guffawing, comparing notes on acreage, wiping sweat from eyes and lips, and hurrying to get out of the house so they could rest beneath the cool trees awhile before Ol' Spit Triggs should start up the steamer again.

The two women came in and out of the dining room, bearing trays of heaping food, carrying out empty plates, holding whispered conferences at the door, perspiring, judging and estimating the hunger of the men, and smiling with quiet satisfaction when Otto and his two brothers, Peter and George, asked for thirds on the vegetables and seconds on pies. The batching boys might be shy with the women personally, Pier reflected, but they weren't with the women's vittles.

He watched the two women. He was surprised to see how well they got along. He studied them, and presently decided that they were friends because they were afraid to be enemies. He saw too that, for the moment, both had a grudge in common: Slop-hole Gertie was a slut, and a lazy good-for-nothing who had no respect for herself in the presence of men.

The two were different, all right. Nertha was pin-clean; Kaia, despite her lively colors, untidy. Nertha was a woman a man ex-

pected children from. Kaia, though she reminded him somehow of a gullied hill, was a female a man took to the bushes to foolish. A man sowed seeds in the first, spilled them away in the second.

He looked down at his empty plate. A strange mood arose in him. He had the feeling he was still riding his colossal load of bundles, that the earth was quaking. The mood was exactly like the one Âlde Romke had once created in him when he was a little boy. The old man, telling solemnly of the power of the Âlde Han, had suddenly pointed at the imaginary demon. Today, just as then, Pier looked up wildly at the window.

· 4 ·

The threshing was done.

Members of the ring, fathers, sons, mothers, children, took the day off and trekked north, some with horse and buggy, some in cars, to picnic at Devil's Gulch; or, as it was sometimes called, Jesse's Jump, near Dell Valley.

It was a cool day, and sunny. The wind came gently from the northwest. The red rocks along the cleft through which the Split Rock River drilled its way, though chilled by the night, were still warm enough for the country folk to crouch on. Picnic spreads of apple butter, purple huckleberry pies, cheese and dried-beef sandwiches, preserves, egg-spotted potato salads, yellow ice creams, beers and ales, lay open upon the grass. The threshers sat in groups. Talk lifted and fell among them. The men wore their best overalls, with white second-best Sunday shirts and fresh socks; the women wore freshly starched bright-print organdy and voile. Near by tethered horses cropped grass contentedly. Buggies and surreys and cars stood empty, waiting.

Pier and Nertha, Red Joe and his tendon-wiry Edna, and Kaia, making up one group, sat in a circle around a cluster of food baskets and coffeepots and pie tins. A short, wind-tortured cedar cast a shadow over the tablespread on the side where the women sat. Pier and Red Joe lay in the sun, soaking their work-stiff limbs in its warmth. Red Joe's three blond, wild-haired children played tag around a nearby bush.

The three women began to lay out the food on paper plates. Silver-haired Nertha dished out the white-yellow potato salad. Kaia put

out the blue-gray pickles. Edna laid out the clinking forks and knives.

Everywhere along the edge of the narrow, winding cut, Sioux quartzite outcroppings glowed red-blue in the sunlight. Out of the sundered earth came murmurings of spilling waters. And west of them the ancient river gurgled against the pilings of a spanning railroad bridge.

Centuries of cutting by the slashing water had isolated towers of rock. They stood tottering in the canyon, their shady sides green and gold with growing moss. In one bend was a staggering pile of rocks, so thrown on each other that by a freak of nature they resembled ascending steps. A low wind moaned chillingly over them. Indians called the steps the Devil's Staircase; it was the place where the Siouxland Satan climbed out of the deeps to gather straying souls.

Over all the slopes and in the dells ferns waved gentle hands. Scraggly cedars reached out broken arms over the walls. Wild-grape vines worked at choking basswood and scrub oak. Some of the sumac had begun to redden. Waving wormwood flushed silver on a hillside. Lichens and hoary five-finger clung to cracks in the rocks. Mauve-leaved woodbine, its blue berries hanging from stems as red as pigeon toes, climbed over a sprawling boulder. Poison ivy curled threateningly in wild foot-long prairie grass. From swales golden-browed black-eyed Susans glowered.

Red Joe said, sitting up, chewing, "Some people got all the luck."

"How do you figger?" Pier asked. He had found a nail in the pocket of his new overall, and with a Mound Builder's maul was laboriously chipping his name into the rock on which he sat.

"Hell, man, you must a threshed out dang near thirty-three hundred bushel."

"Just about." He worked slowly. His fingers tingled. They felt fat this lazy day.

Red Joe slapped at a fly on his leg. "That makes twenty-five hundred bucks. Twenty-five hundred smackers."

"Wal, I had it comin', didn't I?"

"Sure, but . . ."

"But what?"

"I wish I'd a had it. An' I could a used it too." Red Joe slapped at the fly again. "That goddamned land I got. It's so sandy a man's got to have a shower every day to get a crop out of it."

Pier said nothing.

Kaia said, "Yes, an' my land ain't any better." She waved a tangerine kerchief in her left hand as she bent over the spread. "Sometimes I think Pier's Red Bluff could raise more crop than anything I got." She shook her head in pretended regret, her rings clinking.

Pier glanced at Kaia, mentally noting her careless gypsy ways, glanced at Nertha, also noting her ways, and returned to his chipping. The broken bits of quartzite sparkled sharply red. Some of the shattered pieces looked like slices of frozen beet juice. "Yeh," Pier said slowly, grunting as he worked, "yeh, I suppose it does look like I got all the luck this year. Still an' all, it ain't all roses over at our place either, let me tell you. Huh, if the truth was known, you'd find that we worked for nothin' this summer."

Nertha bit her lip reprovingly. She straightened out a corner of the lunch cloth.

"But we did," Pier insisted. "That grain I sold was only a drop in the bucket compared to the size of that big mortgage that's hangin' over our head. Shucks, trying to pay it off is like tryin' to fill that hole back there with a water glass." He pointed at the yawning gulch.

Red Joe chuckled. "Pier, yer a case, all right. Hell, if you was to get a God-awful bumper, you'd complain it was takin' too much out of the land."

"Wal, don't it?"

Red Joe laughed.

Nertha shook her head. "Yes, Joe. Now you know what kind of a man I'm livin' with. Nothin' ever satisfies him. He's got to have better than the best." Tufts of grass, momentarily pressed down beneath the spread, pricked up again, lifting up little islands of cloth. Nertha reached out a hand to flatten them.

Pier caught her eye. "You sure it ain't you who's never satisfied?"

She looked to one side.

Red Joe, Edna, and Kaia acted as if they hadn't heard the byplay.

After a moment Pier went back to his chipping.

Red Joe said, "Them letters is liable to stay a long time."

"Yeh, I suppose they will."

"Till Judgment Day, maybe."

"I guess so."

Red Joe picked up a stone, flipped it idly over his shoulder, held

still until it plunked into the water below. "Say, any fish in there, Nert?"

"Some catfish." Nertha's eyes became dreamy. "Dad Roel and I used to go fishin' in there a lot."

"Is that so?" Red Joe pushed up his Sunday felt hat from his eyes. "Yeh, there's nothin' like a catfish from a Split Rock mudhole ali right. Nothing."

"That's what Dad Roel says."

Red Joe studied a moment. "Somebody's told me that this here Bottomless Pit is really bottomless." He pointed at the water below the footbridge arching over Jesse's Jump.

"Oh sure," she said eagerly, glad to gossip. "Our hotelkeeper once dropped a rope down there with a weight at the end. He couldn't hit bottom."

"Couldn't, huh?"

Pier listened as he chipped away with the stone hammer. He was vaguely aware of Red Joe's speculative eyes, of the movements of the women near him. He sighed and rolled his shoulders. It was a good day to take things easy.

Red Joe said, "That water could go down to hell itself, couldn't it?"

"Could," Pier responded, " 'cept that the water would be hot if it did."

"Huh, never thought a that."

Nertha moved around the spread-out cloth, dishing the food. Because of her pregnancy she moved stiffly. Once she bumped Kaia. She turned quickly and smiled in apology.

Red Joe's eyes moved from plate to plate, watching Nertha's movements. Presently his eyes opened a little and he smiled briefly to himself. He lifted his head, then erased the smirk. He pointed to a glass plate of apple pie, Pier's favorite, and said, "Look, Edna. Look at them plates. See what I mean about them two making so much money? Ain't that some a that expensive stuff you wanted to buy t'Rock Falls?"

Edna looked coldly at the plate. "No. It ain't."

"No? I thought it was. Looks mighty expensive to me." Red Joe leaned forward and, looking under the edge, turned it slowly around so that the largest piece of pie faced him. "Sure. See here? It says it here yet. Ninety-eight cents."

Surprised at the trick, Pier rolled his eyes. Then, suppressing a grin, he leaned forward too and spun the plate around. "By golly, Red Joe, ye're right. At that I did pay ninety-eight cents for it." The largest piece faced him again. Pier winked at Kaia and Edna.

Nertha's brow crossed with a frown. "What are you two men talking about? I didn't pay no . . . besides, I wash them clean." Then she colored, and laughed. "Oh! You two are enough to drive a person into an early grave."

Both men roared, and slapped each other.

Edna said sourly, "I hate to spoil your fun, Joe, but where do you suppose them brats a ours went? They was by the bushes a little while ago."

Red Joe sobered. "I dunno."

Edna glared at him, stroking a lean hand over her forehead and brushing back a stray pale blond hair. "Well, do you suppose you could get off that lazy behind a yours and look? Them kids may be drownded by now."

Wearily Red Joe got to his feet. He sighed.

"Need any help?" Pier asked.

"Naw. I'll find them. Them sons a bitches."

Edna stood up. "Joe, you say that once more and I'll leave you."

Red Joe chewed a moment, spat, looked at her venomously, and bowlegged away. In a moment the tall reed grass hid him.

Pier went back to his chipping. The three women sighed, and waved at the flies on the food. They waited.

Pier had just started on his second initial when Red Joe reappeared.

"Where's the kids?" Edna snapped.

"I don't know. An' I don't give a damn. I'm hungry."

Edna glared at him. "Do you mean to sit there an' tell me you ain't worried whether them kids is gonna eat or not?"

"Hell no. When they get hungry they'll show up fast enough."

Pier pretended to be very busy with his initialing, and he was aware that both Nertha and Kaia were pretending that they too weren't hearing the Fabers fight.

Then Kaia said suddenly, "Say, Pier, that reminds me. I had a funny dream about you last night."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Real funny. I dreamt that we was threshin' on my place." She paused to lean forward and wave her hand at a new colony of

flies on the bread. The posture exposed the upper slopes of her breasts to Pier. "We was threshin', an' you was on the engine and drivin' the belt at me, and I was on the separator, takin' it in. And then, all of a sudden, you was chasing me around the straw pile. You was running and running, your legs workin' fast, an' your breath pantin' like a steam engine's."

Pier looked down. He grunted.

"An' the funny part of it was your tongue was hangin' out an' your two eyes was hangin' closed. It was really funny. A big red long tongue."

Pier stirred uneasily. He glanced at Nertha and tried to grin.

Kaia chittered on. "Pretty soon you caught up with me an' then you stuck your tongue at me an' . . . well, then I woke up."

Red Joe chuckled and leaned over and spat into the grass. "Too bad you woke up."

Edna continued to mutter to herself. "If them kids're drownded you won't hear the last of it, mister."

"Oh, shut up. You make more fuss than a mink with weasels."

Pier barely heard the byplay. He was inwardly upset by Kaia's story. It felt sinful; though he couldn't tell why. "Are you sure it was me?" he asked, momentarily holding up the maul ready to strike.

"Oh sure. It was your eyes. And you had your overall buttoned up. Not like Joe's usually got his, loose at the sides."

"Huh." Pier cracked the maul down. A chip whistled up.

"It sure was a funny dream. I can't understand it."

Pier grunted again. "Neither kin I." He hit once more. The initials *P.F.* were finished.

Red Joe said, "You sure it wasn't a tired tomcat chasin' you, Kaia?"

Kaia cast a vindictive look at him.

Pier threw his Stone Age implements to one side. "Say, is the grub ready?"

Nertha said, "Why yes. But we can't eat till them kids a Edna's show up."

"Aw, t'hell with 'em," growled Red Joe.

Pier said, "Wal, course I don't wanna cheat them kids, but, just the same, I'm hungry." He drew himself nearer the food. "I practically run all over Ameriky gettin' here an' I still ain't put my spit on food yit."

Just then the bushes parted and Jimmy, Red Joe's eldest, three years old, came bawling toward them. Behind him crawled two other blond, nose-running children.

Edna jumped up. "Here you are. Where've you been, you brats?" She wrung Jimmy's ear, boxed the next boy, picked up the youngest to her bosom. "Where'd you take them kids, Jimmy?"

Jimmy sucked in a sigh. "Nowheres." He looked furtively at his father.

"How come these kids are covered by scratches?"

The boy said nothing.

"Wal, kin we eat now?" asked Pier.

"No, no. Edna's first got to wash her kids," Nertha said reprovingly.

"Wal, I'm hungry. Judas."

"Just wait a minute. Keep your shirt on."

"Let's get out the beer then, Red Joe," Pier said, restlessly stirring on the grass.

Before Red Joe could answer, Edna snapped, "No beer. I ain't drivin' home with no drunk."

"Aw, a little beer wouldn't hurt."

Edna, washing her squirming, whining offspring with a wetted handcloth, looked hard at Pier.

Kaia fanned herself with her tangerine kerchief. The talk seemed to bore her. She said, "Well, if we gotta wait, Pier, how about a little music on your accordeen?"

Pier jumped at the suggestion. "A good idee." He got to his feet and fetched his flashing accordion from the buggy. He was back in a moment. "In this day an' age, a man don't do enough singin'. We're all too busy runnin' aroun'."

He opened up the instrument and fiddled with the keys. Sprays of sound twinkled from them. Pier closed his eyes and lifted his face to the sky. He cocked his head to one side, listening, waiting for song to come to him. He looked over the countryside, saw again the raw red yawning cleft curving through the prairie, noticed the thin skin of sod vainly trying to cover it. There came to mind the feeling that he was looking directly into the mouth of a toothless, bloody-gummed monster.

A bit of verse crept timidly into his mind. When he reached for it, it vanished. He waited a moment. He turned to Red Joe, asking,

as he sparred for time, "Got any special tune you want me to sing?"

Red Joe tongued his chaw from his left cheek to his right. "Well, there's only one tune you sing that's worth a damn. That's the one about Jesse James. The one where he jumps the gulch here."

Pier's eyes opened. It was the same he had almost caught. "Why, Red Joe, you must be readin' my mind." He closed his eyes and swung into it.

"Now Jesse James had a heart for the poor.
He'd help a debtor from the floor.
He'd rob a bank
And kill a crank
To keep a widow simon-pure.

"Now Jesse boy once robbed a store.
He came in through the open door.
He did it quick
And did it slick
To help a neighbor needin' more.

"Now Jesse did not see the posse
Spreadin' out to catch our Jesse.
With runnin' houn'
They run him down,
By Devil's Gulch they had our Jesse.

"Now Jesse's horse had played her trump,
The sweat was flashin' on her rump.
But Jesse spurred her
And Jesse whipped her
And jumped her over Jesse's Jump.

"O! Jesse was a daring fool.
His heart was hot, his eye was cool.
He'd ride a ceilin'
To do his stealin'.
O! Jesse was a friendly fool."

Red Joe's eyes shone. "That's right good, Pier. Right good."

"Thank y'u."

"Yep. Why, I got half a notion to jump the Jump myself."

Edna cut in sourly, "Well, before you do, will you dry off these yankin' kids a yers?"

Red Joe turned on her. "Goddammit, woman, can't you let a man have some peace? Christ to hell anyway."

"Now, now," said Nertha nervously, hoping to soothe them.

Pier shook his head, and smiled a little. "Come, come, folks. We're here to have a good time."

"Well, that's all right by me if only Joe would pitch in an' do his share with the kids. I tell you, they're wearin' me down. Like Nertha says, they'll send me to an early grave yit."

"Pitch in? Why, you little . . . look, woman," Red Joe retorted, "ain't it enough that I provide fer 'em?"

"Huh," began Edna, "huh, the providin' you furnish——"

Pier broke in, singing, smiling at them:

"Said the black pot to the kettle:
'Dribble, drabble, dribble-hole,
How'd you black your bottom so?
Is that peat, or is that coal?
Or is that dirt that brought you low?'

"Said the black kettle to the pot:
'Higgle, haggle, higgle-hag,
Scooped and beaten out of clay,
Didn't the potter snap his rag
That you should look so dull and gray?'

"Said the black pot to the kettle:
'Just as soon as you can say
That it's honey and not plain water
That you spill upon the tray
Then you can scoff about my potter.'

"Said the black kettle to the pot:
'Huh. I wouldn't brag if I was you.
I've seen you burn the pork and bean
And leak the juice from soup and stew—
Huh, you needn't think yourself so clean.'

"Sang the kettle and the pot:
'Dribble, drabble, dribble-hole,
Higgle, haggle, higgle-hag.
First we were as clean as gulls,
Then as gray as weathered skulls,
Then as dark as day-old blood,
Then as black as gumbo mud.'"

A vague smile tugged at the lips of both Edna and Red Joe.

Emboldened, Pier said, "Aw, sure, it's a good day. A wonderful day. An' we shouldn't spend it fightin'." He glanced at Nertha and was pleased to see her smiling too; at Kaia and saw that she had already forgotten her strange dream. Kaia's eyes were afire, and she was standing up and doing little turns on her toes. He played on, running tunes and wisps of rhythms through each other in a whirl of sound.

He played a jig tune, stamping his feet, watching Kaia turn on the grass, skipping. One moment she was upright, tall; the next, was on her heels, her skirt flying, her knees apart, her legs crouched for springing.

He looked upward, lifting his face to the blue sky. The fresh scent of cut grass came over the countryside, riding the wind.

He broke off the jig tune, ran the notes together with a swift darting of finger tips, lifted a new melody. He remembered the morning's dawn, recalled awakening with the sudden joy of knowing it was to be a special day. He remembered how he had dreamed his son was born, and he singing to it, calling the boy to come with him.

"Wake up, sleepy head,
The summer morn,
The merry sun,
Is laughing you to scorn.
The red cock koo-ke-loos,
The blue dove roo-koo-koos.
O! you your horn
Should blow this morn.

"Just listen, boy.
The pig and calf,
The chick and foal,
Hee-haw you the hee-haw laugh.

The goslings chatter
The lamblings blatter—
O! wake up now
It's time to plow.

"The larks in the clouds,
The ducks in the slough,
The sparrows, swallows,
All call, all call for you.
The redwing wapping,
The robin hopping—
O! get from bed
You sleepy head."

When Pier looked up, Nertha had hidden her face from him.

· 5 ·

It was a week after the threshers' picnic, and Pier was waiting for Nertha to set the dinner on the table. Outside, through the west window and beyond the clouds of tossing box-elder leaves, he saw blue pigeons fluttering in circles around the white cupola on the barn, lifting from it and lighting on it, playing fancies and whims among themselves.

A jerking wind was on the land, coming up from the southwest. Sometimes it whipped up the dust in the yard, sometimes it wrestled and turned the trees, sometimes it slammed the house-yard gate.

Far above, corn-silk threads of cirrus clouds, vague and high, coming from the south, thinly webbed the sky.

He could not get Kaia's dream out of his mind. He was sure it had some meaning. But what, he did not know. Even when he likened it to the dreams dreamed by Pharaoh's butler and baker, which Joseph had interpreted, it still meant nothing.

Pier's eye caught a movement among the pigeons. They had flown up, scattering, as if something had frightened them. He looked closely; then saw it. A loose shingle had flitted up. Even as he watched, another loose shingle fluttered, and, like a floating propeller-wing seed from a silver maple, it twisted, round and round, circled to the ground.

Pier's eyes narrowed. He pushed the uneasy problem of Kaia from his mind. "By golly, Nertha, my cup'lo's comin' apart. Damned pigeons h'been crappin' on it, an' flappin' on it, an' now with this wind, it's comin' apart."

"Is that so," Nertha said non-committally, as she set a bowl of steaming potatoes on the table.

"Yeh. You know, there's always something to do on a farm. Never no rest. If it ain't one thing, it's another. Shucks, an' here I was hopin' to start the plowin' today. I'm a day behind Red Joe already."

"Oh, calm down now. It won't hurt you none to be behind for once."

"Oh rats. Shucks. Wal, it's gotta be fixed, so I better get up there. A stitch in time saves nine."

"You'll be careful?"

"Oh sure. It's nothin'."

"Well, anyway, be careful." Nertha stroked her thigh with the flat of her hand.

Pier saw the gesture and knew instantly that she had held her talk to keep from inciting him into doing more than was necessary. He knew she thought he was a contrary man. He nodded to himself, and hid a smile.

After he had eaten, Pier went out on the yard, once more pushing the nagging thought of Kaia's dream from him.

Just as he neared the tool shed, the wind flipped off his straw hat and sailed it ahead of his outstretched hand across the yard. He chased it. He ran after it behind the granary, where he caught it. He slapped it to shake out the dust and clapped it firmly down on his head. He went to the tool shed again and collected a hammer, nails, a couple of thin boards and slats, and a few shingles.

He entered the barn. Out of the wind, it became abruptly silent. He thrust the hammer in the loop of his pant leg, dropped the nails into his front pockets, and stuck the wood patching into the bib of his overall. He climbed into the haymow.

Before him, below the ladder at the head of the mow, towered mounds of hay. He glanced up. The hollow cupola above moaned in the wind. The mow echoed lonesomely with it.

A light rope, used to trip hay from slings, hung on a peg behind

him. Unloosening a knot, he tied one end of it around the patching, and the other around his belly.

The alfalfa mounds were aromatic. The barn was sweet with it, and warm and snug against the wind. The old beams creaked and swayed a little. The huge six-by eight stringers beneath his feet jostled slowly against each other.

Brushing dusty spider webs and falling straw and dried bird dirt out of his face, he scratched up the side of the hay door like a quick fly. He was about to swing onto the rope below the hay-carrier rail, and directly below the ridgepole of the roof, when he spotted a huge fresh web covering the rope hole. An occasional fly drifted through it from the outdoors. Off to one side hovered a large spider the size of a shiny black button. There was a small throbbing dot of red on its forepart. His jostling against the rope and the hay carrier had alerted the creature. It hung ready to jump, throbbing with threat.

Pier looked carefully at it, noticed that the red spot was shaped like an hourglass. His eyes widened. Well! A black widow spider.

Pier hung rigid with fright against the door, staring at the black vibrating insect. Its sting, people said, could stiffen a man within the hour. He wondered if he should brush it down with his straw hat. He thought about it for a while and finally decided against it. Doing so wouldn't solve anything. No use having it alive down there in the hay.

He became aware of his fingers. Barely catching onto the thin cleat of the door, they were beginning to tire, to slip. He moved quickly. He swung out an arm, got a good hold on the carrier. Instantly the black widow spider moved, first retreating, then advancing, sweeping over the web, its legs waving blurs of black. It darted for his hand.

Pier drew a nervous breath. He hunched up and leaped out as far as he could. With a straining arm he reached for the track beyond the carrier. And caught it, his legs swinging loosely beneath him, the trip rope flapping and winding around his feet. He swung back and forth a few times. When the momentum left him, he kicked his legs free and took a deep breath.

And then he became angry. That such a tiny creature, no larger than the bulb end of his little finger, should frighten him! His eyes

narrowed. His body drew up tightly. He hunched himself and swung a paw and mashed the black widow spider against the bottom side of the carrier. He rubbed off the squish on his overall.

Shrugging, he drew up his feet and caught the wiggling hay rope between his heels and sole. It hung slack below the carrier rail. Foot over foot, and dragging the trip rope and its burden after, he went down the inch-thick swaying hay hope, steadying himself with his hands on the rail above. Slowly he approached the cupola in the center of the roof. Its whistling moan became louder.

He was under it. He looked up. Above him, on the cupola's ledges, sat pigeons cooing and balancing on pink-red legs. The wind, sifting in through the shuttered sides, sometimes fluffed, sometimes stroked, their purple and red-blue and pearl-white feathers.

The open hole of the cupola was two feet above the rail, and about three feet square. Pier wondered how he should climb into it. It might have been wiser to have gotten at the broken shingles from the outside, to have set up a ladder to the edge of the slanting roof and from there to have built cleats up to the dome. He turned the idea over in his mind a few times, but decided that since he had come this far he might as well go on with what he had started.

He tried to pull himself up on the rail chin first. He couldn't. The extra baggage was just enough to hold him down.

He tried another tack. Swinging his feet free of the unstable, dancing hay rope and giving his legs momentum, he heaved them up over the rail above. A heel caught and in a moment he had a scissor hold on the rail. He twisted, squirmed, grunted, caught an elbow, and, unhooking the hammer, which, hanging in his pant leg, had caught on the wrong side of the rail, pulled himself over the topside of the rail. The trip rope drew tight, cut into his middle, swung the bundle of wood free of the mow floor below.

Balancing, holding his breath, he got his toes onto the thin, inch-wide rail, and from a close, pinched crouch, thrust his body upward. He put out an arm to either side and balanced his way into the cupola.

The moment his head and shoulders appeared in the room of it, the pigeons gulked; and fluttering, retracting their pink-red legs, flew out. Through the slats Pier could see them heading for Red Joe's barn, a mile away to the east.

The wind soughed around him, sighing in the shutters. He put

out a foot to either side of the cupola ledges. He worked around it, testing, pulling, jerking at all the thin shutter slats. Many were loose. The dry wind had shrunk the slats and they had drawn free from their insertion holes.

He unfastened the trip rope from his belly and, drawing it up and paying the free end down again, pulled the few shingles and boards and slats into the moaning cupola. He unhooked all of them and dropped the rope below.

When he had nailed down all the slats, he pushed the shingles and small boards inside the bib of his overall once again, unhooked the north bank of shutters. He set the shutters crosswise over the hole below his feet.

He crawled out on the roof. The wind instantly jerked off his straw hat. It turned and turned and spun toward the corncrib.

Red hair wild, clinging to the edge of the cupola, he worked around it, sliding on the roof. He found the cupola shingles on the north, east, and west sides intact. Those on the north side were moist and mossy.

He rested a moment. Though he felt calm, his fingers were jumpy. He looked at them and wondered if a smoke would settle them. He was about to reach for his corncob pipe when it occurred to him that the hay below needed but a spark to set it off. A pipe of tobacco was hardly worth a winter's feed.

Settled, he worked his way around the cupola to the south slope, directly in the wind. Sometimes whips of dust came off the yard, driving up the roof in blinding snaps. The head of the wood-frame windmill to the south tugged against the brake, occasionally turned halfway. A horse looked up at him. Beyond, the cottonwood leaves chittered with the sound like marbles falling on stone. An odor of fermenting decay came up from a manure pile. Slushy green, it lay to his right, below the eaves of the south slope.

There were two cleats on the south roof, but neither felt right. The first cleat was too high, the second too low. He wondered what damned fool could have tacked them that far apart. If Âlde Romke were here he would say, of course, that the Âlde Han had put them there.

The cleats reminded him that the wooden rungs on the windmill ladder needed repairing too. The last time he had gone up to oil the gears, the rungs had cracked in his hands. The wood around the

nails was almost rotted through. One of these days the rungs would snap off and then there would be hell to pay. And a funeral.

Carefully feeling in his pocket for a few nails and taking a thin board from his bib, and sliding to the second cleat, he nailed down a new one.

Finished, he absent-mindedly glanced at the ground. He was surprised to see, at the garden gate below, Nertha standing and looking up at him with hand-shaded eyes. He waved gaily at her. But Nertha did not respond, except to stroke her thigh. He pointed to the house and shook his bared head as if he were playfully scolding her to get back inside. She shouted something but he could not hear her. He waved again. In a moment she drew back, and turning, went into the house again.

Pier waited. And presently, just as he had guessed, he saw her looking out of the west kitchen window, a pale white coloring behind the panes.

She made him nervous. He didn't like to have people watch him work. It was one of the reasons why he had never become a good baseball pitcher.

He tried to ignore her. He wondered if thinking of Kaia would do it.

Kaia was a fine filly of a woman, she was a juicy June-time heifer. . . . "Hey!" he thought to himself. "Thinking of Kaia is even worse."

Standing on tiptoes, he turned to his work. He reached up and ripped loose the south shingles from the cupola. He let them sail with the wind. He tacked on the new.

The pigeons came flying back from Red Joe's barn. They circled him, flapping and diving around him, clashing their wings together with loud snaps, and winged away again when he waved a hammer at them.

When he finished, he threw the hammer over the north slope and heard it gather speed as it rattled down. *Wbeeemm-gok!* It hit the earth at the front door below. He threw the rest of the patching over too and listened to it glissade down the shingle-rippled incline.

Free to move around, he relaxed, and instantly Kaia was back. She filled his mind with her story of the red tongue. He swore, and turned his thoughts to the work at hand. He reached for the cupola and missed it. He reached once more. Missed. He tottered. Quickly

he thrust out a foot to catch at the first of the Âlde Han's cleats. It slipped off. He hooked his foot on it again. It held. He gave himself a forceful shove and tried to reach the cupola again for support. The rotted cleat crackled, parted. Bits of it spewed into the air. He fell on his belly.

Pier began to slide, slowly. He clutched at the roof shingles but couldn't catch a grip. His eyes opened. He drew in a breath.

He grabbed at the new cleat. He missed it. He grabbed at the second old cleat. But it too was weathered and rotted. It snapped beneath his sliding weight.

He was going. He knew it. Faster and faster. Like a wounded cat, he whirled on his back to face the fall.

He saw the sloppy manure below, to his right. If anything, that was where he should land. It might soften the fall. Quickly rolling over, arm over arm, shoulder over shoulder, his body gaining speed, he aimed himself. He shot over the edge. His body arched through space. He kicked out his legs, his arms. He clutched at the air, a clawing, falling cat. Air rushed up against his skin. It felt as soft as flour. And cool. His muscles stiffened, set themselves for the crackling, smashing hit of earth.

With a gulking sound, he landed in the soggy manure. The pudding-thick mixture fluped over his legs and belly, hands and face. He sank in it.

He had a moment to think before he gasped for air. There was no pain, no hurt, no crunching crack of broken bones, no shooting stars, no pain so hard and beating that his mind lost consciousness. There was instead the yielding, jelly softness of the dung, its terrible taste, its breath-gagging smell of ammonia. And the comforting thought that this green soup, this stink, made up for, canceled out, the sin of dreaming about Kaia. The manure had washed his sins away.

Then he balled up his body and, twisting, turning, and struggling in the boggy puddle, and slapping his hands and kicking his legs, worked his way out.

When he reached the solid ground, he heard a voice squeaking beside him. "Pier! What have you been up to?"

"Me? Nothin'."

"What have you done?"

"Why, nothin'. Except I was too much in a hurry to get down, is all."

"Oh, Pier."

Pier laughed, and with a curved finger scraped green-black slush from his nose and mouth and eyes. He laughed again, trying to forget that he had looked into the vast bottomless hole of death.

3. FALL

. I .

FOR FIFTEEN DAYS, FROM AUGUST 22 TO SEPTEMBER 6, the Big Sioux country had no rain.

Yet the dry spell did not stir up a fever in the land. The rains of early and middle summer had been heavy enough to send the tasseled corn, its roots deeper than usual, safely into earing time. And to help its own cause along, the corn spread flat, wide leaves to every side to keep the sun from searing the ground.

But the pastures were dried and the stubble fields were hardened to brittle crusts. Bluegrass and pigeon grass and foxtail grew sparsely. Fall plowing had to wait.

When the cattle began to reach through the fence, cautiously

pushing and spreading the barbwires apart, and sometimes breaking out, Pier decided to have a look at the wild grasses growing in the county wasteland between his farm and the Big Sioux. He had often wondered why no one had grazed cattle in the tall, half-green, half-dead, wild prairie growths.

A soft wind, smelling as if it had been washed, was playing in the fall sward when Pier stepped over his line fence late one afternoon. Smells of ripe seeds and matured flower perfume rose to his nostrils: the irritating fleabane, the pink-and-purple-flower wild onion, and the slender seeded stinkgrass. The low swales between the tree-shaggy knolls were enveloped by waves of bromes, by tides of satin grasses, by floods of forked and bearded bluejoint blades, by swirls of slough grasses seed-knotty with open crab-claw stems. The wind waved the grasses. It rolled in toward a shore of low hills. Up on a high bank, a blazing star stood purple-sharp in the midst of a waving mass of silver wormwood.

Pier took off his hat. He stood beneath the open sky and mild fall sun, his eyes filling with golden light, his mind reeling from the impact of smell and sound. The wind tugged at his red-sand, wavy hair.

He stood wondering. A song opened in him, tunes, words: long and long has the grass been blowing, and no man has been here for knowing. Long and long. Long before the seed my father was sown, long before the Frisians became a people, long before the growth of ash and maple, long and long, here the grass has long been growing.

He shook himself. He felt drunken. He shook himself again. He had come here, he reminded himself, he had come here to work, not to laze the afternoon away. He had come here to see about a cattle grazing land, not to look with moon eyes on a wasteland.

He pulled up a tuft of grass and smelled it. One stem broke off. He chewed it. He strode through the wild tumult of grassland growth, stubbornly setting his mind against its beauties. He beat through the brush and bog, over low knolls, along the riverbank. With straight eyes he set imaginary lines of fence: barbwire and wooden post. Then, lest the swirling colors of fall should drive him mad, he turned home. When he came to his overgrazed brittle pasture, he drove the cattle up before his going.

On the twelfth of September, the new fence up and the cattle fed until the first snow flew, he took a turn through the fields. He scuffed his toes through the sun-burnished stubbles. He found the ground still too hard to plow.

He studied the skies. He counted the days on his fingers and on the dusty, begrimed calendar in the cow barn. And shook his head.

"Wal," he thought to himself, wondering what he should do next, "wal, there's always the old fences to look over. Might as well make the place shipshape for next year."

Around the north side near Blood Run Creek, along the east side by the highway, and past the south grove of fruit trees and cottonwoods, he worked, replacing rotted poles with fresh-cut Siouxland sapling ash. He replaced brittle, rusty barbwire with blue-new shining strings. Day after day, as long as the skies remained clear, and the earth hard, Pier built up the outer walls of his ship against the broad oceanic prairies around.

The first killing frost came on the eighteenth of September. Pier wrinkled his brow. A man couldn't go on postponing the plowing forever. Soon hard frost would stiffen the ground into a solid cake.

Each evening he watched the moonrise for omens of rain; each morning the east for red dawns, harbingers of heavy clouds. He sniffed the silver-clear air.

Tuesday forenoon, the twenty-fourth, thirty-four days after the last rain had fallen, he finished all the fencing.

And that same noon he noticed cottonlike streaks of clouds drifting across the very roof of heaven. Wondering if the mare's-tails were coming from the south, despite a northwest ground wind, he walked over to the woodshed to study their going against the edge of the eaves. He stood a long while, watching, not quite making out if they were moving.

He walked out on the rising slope east of the house, kicking at the stubble field. It had become very hard. The stubbles stood thinly. Crusty bunches of frost asters and orange-red-berried sprays of wild asparagus spotted the ground.

He sighed. A man couldn't wait forever. He decided to trade in the single-share sulky plow for a new green-and-yellow two-share gang plow. The big plow would make up for lost time. As for the expense, wal, the oats crop had been a bumper and the corn was coming heavy.

A slow ferment of excitement bubbled in his veins. A little more and he could hole up for the winter, with plenty of food for his animals, his debts paid, and his wife ready to bear.

He got the trotters up from the overnight pasture, ate dinner, napped while Nertha washed the dishes, mounted the springboard seat atop an open wagon with her, and drove to town with the sulky rambling along behind.

While Nertha shopped at the grocery store, he haggled with Blacktail over the price of a new plow and the trade-in value of the old. At last, the trade completed, he hitched it behind the wagon.

Exultant, he wanted to share his joy. On an impulse he suggested they pay the old folk a visit.

Nertha nodded, hiding a smile.

Ma Lysbeth seemed surprised at their sudden coming, and was even more startled to see how far along Nertha was. She softened toward them and served a cup of tea from an old Frisian copper kettle.

Over old teaware, and between sips of hot beverage and nibbles of brown rusks coated with butter and white sugar, Pier and Âlde Romke blew up excited talk about bumper crops.

And finally, Ma Lysbeth, excited herself, got out some baby finery and showed Nertha the swaddling clothes she had made for Pier when he was born.

Later, smiling, gay, the new gang plow flashing and ambling after, Pier and Nertha drove home.

Just as they climbed the swelling land east of their farm, the tolling of the village bells came up after them.

Nertha bowed her head, listening. The coming wonder of motherhood was like a halo around her head.

Pier murmured the words:

> *"Ring! go home, fathers, brothers, go home again,*
> *Ring! go home again.*
> *Your cattle winds along the trail,*
> *Your milkers sing and fill the pail.*
> *Your mothers give the child the breast,*
> *Your sisters search the chicken nest.*
> *Ring! go home, toilers, go home again,*
> *Ring! go home again.*
> *Ring! Ring! Ring!"*

He looked to the west. Lifted as they were on the prairie rise, with the sun sinking through the murky veils of purple and gray on the

Hills of the Lord across the Big Sioux, and the valley shadowed and far below, he dreamed they were rising into the heavens.

· 2 ·

All night long and the next day, the rains fell in a fine spretting drizzle. At first the dried-up mother earth resisted the sky's love-making. But soon the laving softened her. She became receptive. She yielded. She awoke. She opened her breasts to the caressing clouds. She became hungry. She opened her mouths and drew in the drenching rains.

In the wet, warm womb of the old earth some of the young fall seeds burst open. Sprouts popped up white and trembling.

Then the girl-land, satiated, enveloped and serene, relaxed at last. She suffered the laving rains until she was swollen.

Little streams flickerwicked at the roots of the stubbles and dribbled into the sods of sleeping bluegrass roots. It sent crowds of refugee insects scurrying into the denser growths. Drowned black beetle bodies lay scattered along the miniature banks of the clear water streams.

And the earth, once so stiff and unyielding, became a mellow woman, breathing and sighing in her sleep, half awakened and half awakening, her veins and arteries and capillaries alive with moving blood.

· 3 ·

Twice during the second night he awakened a moment. Listening, he heard the gentle skitterings of rain trickles on the roof, heard the quiet regular breathing of his wife beside him. He smiled and fell asleep again.

When he awoke the third time, it was morning. He stole quietly out of bed, letting Nertha sleep a little longer. He slipped off his nightshirt in the dark, drew on his underwear, his shirt, put on his overall. Picking up the alarm clock from the floor and fastening his suspenders as he went, he prowled his way through the living room into the dark kitchen.

He hunted with a roving hand in the dark until he found the brass kerosene pulldown lamp. He scratched a match on his raised, overalled leg. The match head sizzled, flamed. While he waited for it to

steady, he noted the purple-and-red flower design on the porcelain fuel bowl of the lamp. The glass lusters glittered. Then, quickly lifting the fluted chimney, he set the flame on the wick. The light came up, pouring like quick yellow waters into the corners of the room. He saw the clock pointing to five. Nodding, he threw a flame in the fire pot of the range. He set water on the front part of the stove for coffee and oatmeal.

Dressing in a faded, soiled blue denim jacket, a blue cap, and red rubber boots, he stepped outdoors. A brilliant star, a water drop of silver-white, hung in the eastern sky. The heavens were clear of clouds. A brisk wind, smelling as if it had come off a frozen sea, blew in from the northwest, tipping and tossing the maples and ash and box elders, and rattling the hard, varnished leaves of the cottonwoods. He breathed deeply, so deeply he felt dizzy, almost lost his balance. He breathed happily, singing to himself.

He thought of his coming son, composed a song for him as he hurried through his morning chores.

"Rising autumn morn,
Stick your silver horn
Through the skin of day
And give the sun his way.
Drive the horse and kine
Down the pasture lane.
So! to house! sa boys! so baas! so ho!
Early in the morn.

"Stir those lazy legs,
Lock the stanchion pegs,
Tie the switching tail,
Grab a stool and pail,
Pull a tit and get
Five per cent of fat.
Ting! Tish! Sjt! Sjt! Sjt!
Fast! you lazy legs.

"Got no time to waste,
Grab a tit and haste,
Give your cow a pat,
Five per cent of fat.

Sing and whistle, pull!
Until your pail is full.
Bruzt! Bruzt! Sjt! Sjt! Sjt!
Got no time to waste."

It had just begun to light on the horizon, a gray-silver becoming a gold red-blue, when he drove his shining gang plow off the yard. Six horses were spanned ahead. Maid and Mell, the wise old grays, were in the lead hitch. The blacks, Colonel and Topsy, to the right, and the nervous, snorting trotters, Queen and Daise, to the left, were in the rear.

He went up the lane, past the house. He saw pregnant Nertha, and, with a sudden jump of heart, realized that he could see his coming son even from where he was. He waved to her.

At the end of the lane, he swung the lead team east through a gate into the big fifty, and stopped. He stood up on the crossbeam to have a look around.

He studied the lay of the land for a few minutes. He lighted his corncob pipe, looking to the right and to the left. And at last made up his mind. He would plow the big fifty east to west, instead of north to south as Âlde Romke had always done. To have all the furrows lead to the yard would make the field more a part of the farm. Besides, the old dead furrows running from north to south were beginning to ridge the land.

Jumping off the plow, putting his pipe away, he stepped off a distance from the road fence. When he was directly in line with the tip of a cottonwood peering over the east land swell, he stopped, looked, nodded. Here he would cut the first furrow. With his toe he scraped a mark in the rain-softened earth. He went back to his plow, clambered on, circled the horses in a wide sweep, hit the mark, and headed them straight for the cottonwood.

Maid and Mell understood him. Jerking their heads up and down and rattling their bridle bits and lines and chains, they went directly for the treetop. The big blacks, dumblings, followed like slaves. The nervous trotters fell back, stopped, snorted, stopped, and finally, with a clang of metal upon their legs, swept forward with a rush.

Pier stood on the crossbeam like a tense captain on the jumping bridge of a ship. His eyes were flared. He waited until the plow had reached a certain distance from the end and then, kicking the

trip lever with his foot, dropped the shares. The big plow jumped. The shares, gleaming red-gold in the dawn, like the phallus of a bull, plunged into the soft womb of the earth. It tore her open. It rent her, bent her back. The man and the plow and the horses were one, were the same, a bull; the earth a heifer beneath.

The rolling colter ran gaily ahead through the stubbles, slicing off two neat strips, slashing through old cornstalks, splitting the tough roots of the wild burdock and sunflower. Like slow honey pouring, the heavy brown soil curled out of the curving shares.

Cockleburs let go of their roots with an anguished wrench and, turning, dropped from sight beneath the tumbling loess. Imprisoned fluffs of tickleweed puffed from the soil like smoke. Tenacious wild-rose stems, shiny brown bark torn open, snapped off with the sound of a low voice stopped.

Pier held his eyes steadily on the cottonwood tip ahead. He did not have to look back to know he was cutting a furrow as straight as eyesight over the rising swell of the prairie. Like a black ribbon it would tie up the land with the yard.

Now and then he glanced at the pulling horses. He studied the evener to see if the handicap he had given the trotters, unused to field work, had offset the weight and power of the blacks. He compared the slim arching thighs and the quick steps of the bay trotters with the bulging rumps and ponderous steps of the blacks. He would know in a half hour. If they winded, he would have to reset the evener.

Up the slow hill the big bull drove. It tore open but did not seed.

Up the old roll of the land the happy captain steered his green-and-yellow plow, his new machine, sailing a lifting ocean.

The horses topped the rise. The cottonwood at the end of the field came into full view.

Pier bore down on it, glancing neither to the right nor to the left. He fixed his eye on it. He drove the horses and the plow as if they were a single hitting bullet.

He reached the east end of the field. Leaving the shares in the earth, he touched the lead-horse line. Maid and Mell responded. Side-stepping, veering, they swung around until they were alongside the black earth that had just been overturned and were headed back to the house again. The plow anked. It straightened out.

"Git, boys, git!" Pier yelled. "Git there, git."

Once more the momentum began. Roots snapped and popped beneath. The plow rocked and rolled and tossed.

Relentlessly the plowing bull pursued the reeling heifer-earth. Soft and yielding, her soft fleshes ripped open, bleeding, running trickles of water, she suffered him his satisfaction.

He looked up. The top of the hill was just coming up underneath the plow. He glanced ahead to the house, glanced back to the east fence. And shouted. The furrow he had just made was the straightest he had ever cut.

The sun came up. It reached strong arms of light over the land.

He knew the world to be a noble home to live in. Crops came in. Wives became pregnant. Debts disappeared. Men glowed ripely with the flush of their success. It was a joy to subdue a half-yielding earth.

He looked ahead. Over the nodding heads of the horses, beyond to the west, autumn flames were leaping in the trees on the banks of the Big Sioux. Fires ran high in the twigs and leaves on the Hills of the Lord beyond. Molten red-gold boiled in the maple clumps. Pisselms yellowed. Lemon-silver bubbled in the valley pockets of ash. Flower madness swirled up the sumac ravines.

A prairie fire of frost flames was sweeping up the Big Sioux, the Can-ka-sda-ta River, rushing up the Where-They-Paddle-Softly-by-the-Woods Valley. The lava of livid fall colors poured down the hills, igniting the burning bush and the red haw, searing the heart-leaved willow, blackening the flushing moonseed growth. Frostbite singed the rose-purple prairie clover, the silver-leaf pursh. Squaw-weed and mad-dog skullcap mingled with the purply meadow rue. Sweet-scented plots of bedstraw and spleenwort blushed in the shaded draws.

Descending toward the house yard, Pier drew a harmonica from his shirt pocket. He blew. Tunes lifted like rising larks.

Pederson, the Old Dreamer, the county agent, came by along the east road. He stopped. He rolled down a window of his Model T. He pulled his tan cap down over his eyes as he surveyed Pier's work.

Pier looked admiringly at his own furrow. "Straight as a beeline, ain't it?"

"That it is."

"Yip." Pier smiled broadly. "Good land, ain't it? Wonderful good land. Black as the ace a spades."

"That it is."

"Yip." Pier lighted his pipe. "Yip. Best job on the farm is plowin'. Fall plowin'."

Pederson nodded.

"Yip, you got to open her up before you kin seed her down."

Pederson cleared his throat. "How come you're not plowing her north and south like you used to?"

"Huh? Oh, it was ridgin' so."

"Uh-huh. What's wrong with ridging?"

"I dunno. I just don't like it."

"Huh. The hard-iron fact is, you're going to lose her plowing east and west."

"How so?"

"Why, you're giving the rains a chance to rip her."

"Aw."

"Besides, ain't the field longer north and south?"

"Yeh. A little."

"Don't long rounds make time?"

"Oh wal, they ain't that much longer."

"Well, you know best."

Pier growled and puffed on his pipe.

"Sure. I'm just full of them high monkey-monk idees you talked about," Pederson said, his eyes sad. Then he started up his Model T and drove on.

All the morning long Pier plowed the land.

All the forenoon long the unprotesting, dumb earth submitted to the tearing of her fleshes.

And gradually the horses drew up evenly, and tired together, the bays and the blacks, the grays far in front.

After dinner and a nap, he was back again, singing, raping.

The wind veered suddenly from the northwest to the southeast. The air became steamy with moisture. The tops of the newly torn-up earth became beady with water. Vapor rose from the land. The horses sweat.

The soft earth reminded Pier of Nertha. Like her, it submitted

itself silently to his workings. Like her, it had been seeded the past spring. Like her, it was bringing forth young, oats in the summer and corn in the fall. Like her, its ways had subtly changed, as if a key had been turned in a lock and a new woman had been awakened. No one had told Nertha when to begin the knitting of the woolen soaker and to cut the cloth for the swaddling clothes; no one had told the earth when to toughen its husks at earing time.

A black cloud of crows flew over, cawing harshly. There was a momentary chill on the land. Their craking had the sound of a funeral wailing; it reminded him of war, of the great strife on the breast of another earth across an ocean.

He lighted his pipe. Smoke from it coiled around his shoulders and trailed behind, sinking in the muggy air.

The wind from the southeast came up stronger. It tugged at his jacket. It enveloped him, made him swelter.

Between rounds he stopped to breathe the horses. He walked around them, murmuring and talking, soothing the panting bays, the tiring blacks, the phlegmatic grays ahead. All seemed equally tired. He lifted the burning collars from their shoulders. In the silent afternoon, man and beast and earth drew uneasy breaths

The sun lowered, sank. Shadows stretched east of the trees, of the house, of the woodshed. Purple deeps appeared in the stubbles, beneath the plunging shares. Dark cavernous mouths gaped in the furrow wounds.

He stood on the rocking, swaying frame of the plow, watching the unending slice of earth coil beneath him, crumpling, twisting, falling upside down. Roots, yellow-blue clays, air holes, worms, grubs, decayed cornstalks, strange pebbles, rusty gravel lumps, lime balls, stones, mottled flecks of red and buff and black, and rusted metals, boiled up and disappeared again. The roots of Canadian thistles and wild rutabaga and morning-glory, and ragweed and pigeon grass and wild rosebush, snapped. Their stems disappeared beneath the smothering clods and wet loess veneer.

Slowly the afternoon drifted on. Round after round the new strip widened. The plow tore up the soil, cutting the tender skin of the earth, opening up its belly to the ravaging elements. The bull-plow was merciless.

Slowly the shadows of the horses lengthened, slowly the great earth turned. The sun lowered, fell in the sky.

Another round, and on a hummock to the southeast, on the horizon's wavering edge, gleamed the windows of the Brandt house caught by sun-fire, glowing orange, in flames.

Another round, and to the northwest, the tip of a cloud appeared.

Another round, and the cloud tip became the nose of a universe-wide anvil. It spread dark and low over Gitchie Manitou, loomed glowering over Blood Run Valley.

An invisible arm swung. A hammer hit. League-long sparks flew forth. A crash rumpled the mighty thunderheads.

Another round, and evening came. The sun vanished. Cloud-darkness and night-darkness came. Lightning flickered in the cloud folds along the hard black horizon; a giant was lighting his pipe behind huge cupped hands.

Another round, and Pier's strip of newly plowed land became so wide that the last furrow down the hill cut into a shallow dip.

In the past, after heavy rainfalls, water had sometimes swelled into the size of a stream in the dip, had run across the lane, had swept hints of mud onto the grass beneath the apple trees, had poured through the barnyard past the windmill and hog yard, and on, until it had become a small creek in the pasture, heading southwest toward the Big Sioux.

As Pier unhitched the tired, head-down horses, he heard Nertha's voice, singing, bell-clear in the cool, still, prestorm air of evening, as if she were standing directly behind him. He turned about, and was surprised to find that she was nowhere near. He looked more closely, drawing his red brows down over his blue eyes. And then saw her. She was sitting in the doorway of the woodshed across the end of the field. She was singing the churning song:

"Churning, cheesing, churning, dlonk.
Butter in the churning, glonk."

· 4 ·

In the dark, and high above, a warm muggy southeast air mass pressed softly and steadily into the northwest.

From the northwest, closer, nearer, hugging the ground, a cold wind raced into the southeast.

Little wrestles of contradictory winds tugged at the trees and the

buildings, swooped into the valleys, turned and danced on the level plateaus.

Sometimes the playful Caribbean wind came strong, steady; sometimes weak, yielding, vacillating.

But always the northwest wind came strongly, blowing out from the great Canadian refrigerator. Monstrous towers of air reaching into the endless stratosphere pressed down on the land, and pushed sideways against the low pressures around it. Through the weakest side poured a dazzling crispness, a cold searing draft of escaping, raging air, pushing and shoving.

The polar Canadian shoved its ground-hugging plowshare into the soft, yielding, gentle belly of the merry southeast breeze. Coldly, harshly, impervious to the Caribbean caresses of the gay little breeze, it came on, relentlessly driving, pushing, shoving upward all the still airs and the stale airs, and shunting the moist air of the southeaster into the heavens.

The warm air rose, condensing, misting. A bulking cloud spread out. A low front, black and purple in the dark night, swelled over the land.

The storm was without light or eye. But it knew. It was.

A terrifying calm opened on Pier's farm. Trees quieted. Gay leaves hung limply.

Then, crashing, crushing, the cowcatcher cloud came down on the farm. Trees suddenly leaned over, touched the ground. Bushes jumped like startled dogs. The house and the barn cracked; and bent; and cracked; and bent back; and held against the wind.

Man and beast cowered; waited.

Rain beat down.

Winds roared by.

And floods splashed on the gray-brown loess.

In the dark, the fallen water on the stubbled swell east of the house began to flow. It piled against a handful of straw. It deepened. It trickled over the miniature dam. It swelled, it spilled, then poured into the backed-up waters of a similar dam just below. The second dam, inundated by an extra flood, split open, and poured down upon the next dam below, breaking it too, and starting an irresistible trickle, a tiny stream.

Yet the stubbles, though lean from the summer dry spell, and al-

most too thin, too few, held the gathering waters, restraining, blocking. The lean stubble roots, the straw terraces and the dam piles, held the soil, the piled-up debris.

At the very first drop on the freshly plowed land, the wounds in the soil began to spill precious black bloods into Pier's last furrow. Minerals, humus, growing energies that the earth had been extracting from its digestive system for millions of years, washed out of the wound at the rate of a thousand years a second. Food-laden fluids bled from the little capillaries. Growing streams sucked stiff old arteries dry of their blood. Hardened veins collapsed with a soughing noise.

Down the furrow, in the old dip, the black blood raced, tearing, widening the wound. It gathered head. It gathered speed. It became vicious. It became voracious. All through the dark night it roared down the old land dip in the hill.

Coming upon the lane, it leaped the hardened buggy tracks, splashed on the grass beneath the apple trees, spilled over the barnyard ground pressed hard by thousands of animal steps, poured into the pasture toward the Big Sioux.

At first the grass in the apple orchard resisted the lecherous visitor from the hill. The slim leaves matted. The web-root threads tightened.

But the visitor was strong. It overpowered the grass, tore up her sods and cut off her roots and took her with him.

Then the mad stream began to cut into the humus-black loess. It dug and cut and dug until the humus washed out. Sterile yellow loess appeared.

Worms were gouged from their minuscule tunnels. Field mice drowned. And grasshoppers, legs still flexing, capsized.

Cups of pebbles, greenstones, rusty granites, red quartzites, rattled together. And ancient skeletons of bivalves and terrestrials popped out of old graveyards. And flowed down the stream.

The cold front of the polar Canadian raced eastward. The clouds followed it.

Soon the air cleared. The wind became a bracing northwest breeze.

All night long water riffled over the red-green sparkling pebbles lying in the bed of the new cut in the orchard.

The next day, Pier, seeking a juicy greening in the orchard, saw the new ditch. He was surprised to see it. He gazed at it awhile, wondering where the dirt and the grass and the soil had gone, wondering if it would fill in again, wondering if more would come from the hill.

Then, shaking his head, not paying much attention to the wound, he went on.

A little of the grass and the humus-black loess was gone forever.

4. WINTER

. I .

ONE EVENING, THE TWENTY-SEVENTH OF December, voices suddenly sounded on the porch. There was a knock. The door opened.

Pier, lying on his leather horsehair sofa, roasting his toes in the heat of the hard-coal burner, jumped up, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Nou, dou âlde grize bolle, have you got an extra cup of tea for us?"

It was Âlde Romke. Smothered in whorls of red scarf, a thick sheepskin, cloth boots, followed by Ma Lysbeth dressed in a woolen stocking cap and a black velvet coat, he stepped through the doorway.

"Wal, Judas t'Priest! Hi, Pa. Come on in. C'mon. Hi, Ma. It's good to see you."

Âlde Romke beamed and stamped. Sparkling bits of new snow fell from his shoulders. He looked at Nertha. He smirked and chuckled. "How's the boss?"

"Good." Nertha's eyes opened. A slow smile stirred her. She gathered up her knitting and got to her feet too, clumsily, her child burden heavy on her.

"Wo'dammit, soan, by golly, she shines."

"She should. I've been feedin' her johnnycake for a month."

Ma Lysbeth stood quietly by, studying Nertha, an old knowing look wrinkling her eyes.

Pier helped Âlde Romke out of his sheepskin. "Wal, an' did you two walk over from town?"

"No. Brackx was going to the Grimovich boys, an' he offered." Âlde Romke brushed his wispy, sand-red hair. He stroked his arrow-sharp beard. He drew up a rocker to the stove, and filled and lighted his pipe. In a moment the sharp sweet smell of tobacco filled the room.

Pier warmed. Their coming was official recognition that he and Nertha were a family now, man and wife and coming child, to whom neighbors came for a sociable evening's talk. He helped Ma Lysbeth out of her black coat. "Wal, that's fine. Nertha, make some tea. To warm up Pa's bones."

"Now, now," Ma Lysbeth said, taking off her stocking cap and rubbing a hand over her windbelly, and smiling, "no fuss now."

"Wal, Pa wants some."

"Pa can wait. An' anyway, we ain't stayin' but a minute."

"Wouldn't you like some, Pa?" Pier persisted.

"Well, a cup of the, well——"

"See!" Pier exclaimed. "Go get some."

"But her condition," Ma Lysbeth began. "She——"

"Aw, a little work ain't gonna hurt her none. Hell, I work a mare right up to the last minute an' it never hurts her."

"Pier."

"It's all the same, mares, women. Ever notice how Slop-hole Gert gets 'em while she's at work? Why, I've seen the time when all she did was to take a little longer step, and plop, there it was."

"Pier!" Nertha warned.

"Now, now," Âlde Romke purred quickly. "Don't fight, don't fight. We old people ain't worth it."

"He's been like that all day," Nertha snapped. "Bossy, an' full of rough talk."

"Hoho, so I'm the one who's bossy, huh? Wal, lady . . ." Pier paused, suddenly remembering that he had company and that he was opening the door of his home for the old people to look into. He caught a breath. "Oh shucks, Nertha, I guess maybe we both got out a bed on the wrong side this morning."

Ma Lysbeth turned to Nertha and said, "Pay him no mind, Nertha. Men's brains ain't never no bigger than their eyes."

Nertha hesitated, looked once more at Pier, and then, with Ma Lysbeth following, disappeared into the kitchen. A second later the teakettle rattled on the range.

Pier growled to himself.

Âlde Romke held up his hands to the gold-scarlet fire glowing behind the narrow isinglass windows of the hard-coal burner. "Soan, are you two getting along all right?"

"Oh sure."

"Are you?"

"Sure."

"Good."

Pier dug around in his pocket for his corncob pipe.

"An' how is the heifer? Princess?"

Pier looked up. Wal! so the old man hadn't forgotten the yearling that Âlde Hengist the bull had bred too early. "To tell you the truth, Pa, I'm worried about her."

Âlde Romke nodded. "You haven't made the night's rounds yet, ha' you?"

"No."

"Ain't fed the cows some extra hay?"

"No."

"Soan, hast it forgetten?"

"No. I still got plenty of time before midnight." Ever since Pier could remember, Âlde Romke had gone to the barn before or at midnight on the twenty-seventh to give the animals and birds an extra portion of hay. There had been a time, Âlde Romke once said, when the old Frisians held feasts and fire offerings on this night. Just why, he could never say.

"Well, anyway, it won't hurt to go now," Âlde Romke said, standing up.

Pier got to his feet too. "All right. Might as well go now as later." While Âlde Romke put on his outdoor clothes again, Pier put on his own heavy clothes, a leather-lined blue-black mackinaw, blue woolen cap, and rubber buckle boots. With hardly a word to Nertha, he lighted a lantern, and stepped outside, Âlde Romke beside him.

The lantern cast a dancing, orange light on the new snow. White flakes became gold. They swirled around the glass chimney. The leg shadows of the two men swelled to enormous proportions in the distance, engulfing trees and buildings with each striding step.

They entered the barn, closed the door after them. The cows up and down the alley blinked dumbly in the sudden light, their eyes balls of mauve-yellow fire. Across from them the horses stirred, looking up from their chewing of old manger hay, blowing puffs of steam. There was a smell of fresh dunging, of crushed straw, of cows' breath.

"Well, soan, I see you got all the beasts inside tonight."

"Oh sure. It's going to freeze till it cracks."

The old man nodded. He took down a milk stool and sat on it. "Now, tell me, how goes it? Siz it my."

Pier sat down too. He pulled out his corncob pipe again.

"Is Nertha all right?"

"Wal, yes an' no."

"You've been to see a wife doctor?"

"No. Not yet. But we're gonna get Dr. Helder."

Âlde Romke grunted.

"Wal, Pa, I feel about doctors the same way you do. They ain't as good as veterinarians when it comes to fixin' bones. They ain't as good as grammas when it comes to fightin' sickness. Like that flu that went through here. The old-lady recipes were the best."

"Ae."

"Yet, still an' all, the wimmen swear by this Dr. Helder. They say he knows his birthin'. An' since it's wimmen who get the gaddanged babies, a man's gotta listen."

"Ae, that he does."

"An' the main thing now is to keep Nertha in a good frame a mind. It helps."

"Ae."

Pier sighed. "Judas Priest, but it's been tough to please her. Wow. That old lady a mine, I'm sure learnin' things about her. She's been as crabby as a cocklebur. Fussy. Keeps straightenin' things out, this an' that, cleanin', scrubbin', complainin'. An' yellin' about me stinkin', my overalls, socks . . . I tell you, Pa, that last month or two with a woman ain't easy sailin'."

"I know." Âlde Romke filled his curve-stem pipe. He lighted it with a long match. When he had it going, he carefully scrunched out the hot end of the match beneath his rubber heel. "When do you expect?"

"Oh, sometime in January."

"Uh-huh." The old man looked up suddenly, his eyes hard on Pier. "An' the boy's name?"

Pier quickly hid his eyes with his hand. He puffed on his pipe. "Wal, Pa, we ain't decided yit."

"It's getting to be about time, ain't it?"

"Sure. Yeh. We've talked about it."

The old man grunted.

Pier said, "Maybe it'll be Romke, maybe it'll be Buckskin Teddy, or maybe it'll just be plain Jesse James. I dunno."

Âlde Romke coughed.

"But we ain't decided it yit. The old lady's been touchy an' so we didn't." Pier teetered on his one-legged stool.

Âlde Romke punched tobacco down in his pipe with a probing forefinger.

A cow spread her rear legs and staled. The arching amber stream spattered near Pier's foot. He moved it to one side. He said, "I kin tell you one thing though, Pa. If we get Princess and Nertha through, we'll have a real year this year."

"Soa?"

"Yeh. A helluva year. Why, I've already got enough money to pay off all my debts."

"The plow? Cultivator?"

"Yessir. An' the mortgage too."

"No!"

"Every last red cent of it."

"It farm is free?"

"It will be. Every last stone of it."

The old man jumped to his feet. He stamped. He puffed, smoke billowing around his rosy-cheeked, wrinkled face. "It is a miracle. A miracle. Good, my boy. Perfect good. Ae."

Pier laughed. He too puffed on his pipe. "Yip. Free. An' all because we had a lot a luck this year."

"Ae. An' a lot a hard work. An' God's will. Don't forget that."

Pier nodded. "Some. But mostly it was luck."

Âlde Romke eyed him, twinkling. "Now, now, you know you think you did it all yourself."

Pier said nothing, grinning.

"The corn, how many bushels did you get again?"

"Three thousand. An' that with fatt'ners, the steers and hogs, did it. Yip, the check should be in the mail tomorry. An' then we pay off the mortgage."

"Will you have any left over?"

Pier noticed a crafty tone in the other's voice. "Why? Do you need some?"

"Oh no. No, I was thinking of something else."

"What then?"

"Oh . . . maybe you wouldn't want to anyway. Forget it."

"Tell me."

"Well, you've heard about the Drake Estate of course?"

"Yeh."

"Blacktail wants me to invest a little in it."

"Him?"

"Ae."

"I'm agin it then. Any time he's for something, I'm agin it."

"Yes, but it's a good thing."

Pier swore to himself. He recalled the rumor that had been going the rounds for a number of years. Hundreds of years ago Queen Elizabeth of England had promised Admiral Sir Francis Drake, as a reward for the many new lands he discovered for her, a quarter of her kingdom. Some of that promised land was supposed to be in Oregon, some in British Columbia, some in South Africa, some in Australia, some in Asia. When Sir Francis died, his heirs discovered, according to the legend, that certain legal obstacles were in the way of possession. They dickered with the courts, with the Crown. They dickered many years, never successfully establishing their claims. The next generations were equally unsuccessful. And at

last, after three hundred years, the descendants, needing money to continue the fight, had commissioned agents to sell shares. The money gathered would be used to continue the fight. Some of the agents, according to the story, had come to America where people had money. And hundreds of farmers, suddenly seeing a way of making quick money, had plunged in with their hard-earned savings. Some had been so taken in they even became agents themselves. The scheme was so vast, so grandiose, that the farmers' usual grudging caution had been overwhelmed. When some, wanting quick results on their investments, pressed for action they were told that the British probate courts were holding it up until certain deeds and titles were cleared. The mysterious legal-sounding phrases crushed any possible suspicion.

Pier shook his head. "Pa, don't get into it. With Blacktail in it I smell a rat."

"But, soan, I saw the proofs. I saw it, black on white."

"Horse collar. Pa, what do them little marks on paper mean anyway? You didn't see the land yourself with your own eyes, did you?"

"No? What are them maps for then, Doubting Thomas?"

"But, Pa, don't you catch on? That land they talk about is everywhere else but here."

"But I saw the papers. Blacktail's got 'em in his office."

"Pa, Blacktail is a crook."

"Well, I don't know now. Soan, I tell you, I used to think the same thing myself. An' I used to hate his old man. But lately, I don't know. I've been talking to him, and really, he's a pretty nice fellow. For one thing, he's got manners. He ain't a beek roughneck."

"Pa, don't tell me you invested a little?"

The old man reddened. "Just wait, soan. When we win our case, an' the Kening fan Ingelân pays off, we'll see who's made a mistake."

"Pa, how kin you be friends with a man who really, deep down in his heart a hearts, if he had a chance, would slicker his own grandmother?"

The old man emptied his pipe, refilled it.

Pier cleared his throat. "Tell me, Pa, what's he been up to lately?"

The old man still said nothing.

"I hear he's bought out the Starum Hardware. An' the garage that was once our old livery stable."

Âlde Romke lighted a match. He held it over his pipe, carefully drawing the flame down into the tobacco grains. The pipe seethed.

"No, Pa, if I was to invest my money anywhere, I'd put it in a new car."

"Now listen who's nuts."

"No, really. I could use one. Make quick trips to Sioux Falls, Sioux City. So on. Save a lot a time."

"Ach!"

"Yip. I've decided to get me a Reo. Got a strong rear ex, they say."

"But, soan, can you drive?"

"Wal, I kin learn, can't I?"

The old man shook his head. "Soan, I never dreamed I'd live to see the day when you'd buy a car."

"Is it a sin to get one?"

"Well, maybe not a sin. But I do know cars will be the ruination of the country."

"Horse collar."

"An' what good are the dummed things? They don't have colts an' they don't make manure. No. I just can't see a Frixen with a car. It just ain't our way."

They were silent for a while.

Finally Pier said, "Wal, we came here to look at Princess. C'mon. She's back there." Pier stood up, and hung his stool on a peg on the alley wall.

Âlde Romke did likewise, and followed Pier to the pens in back.

"Here she is. Frisky an' fat."

Âlde Romke nodded. His eyes warmed a little.

Princess got up from the straw, her afterlegs clumsy, and nosed Pier's mackinaw.

Pier couldn't resist rubbing an old sore. "She still acts like a calf. Like a girl grabbed too early."

"Mm."

"Just like a girl that's just put on her itchin' pants."

When Âlde Romke didn't bite, Pier swallowed, decided to temporize a little. "There's one thing though that's really funny. She took the bull the other day."

"No."

"That's right. She's about as bad as Nertha was a month ago."

Âlde Romke looked up. "Nertha?"

"Yip. She couldn't get at me fast enough. An' that's funny too. Because there was a time when she wasn't willin'."

Âlde Romke looked to one side, embarrassed.

Pier rattled on. "Talkin' about itchy pants reminds me a that little runt I got back here." He pointed to a stubby creature the size of a calf. It had the manners of a bull. "That danged thing will breed anything with a hole in it. Took a fly at a knothole there yestiddy, an' danged near upset the barn. Him hoppin' a cow is like a fox terrier hoppin' a great Dane."

The old man chuckled. "It's a dwarf."

"Sure. That's right."

They stood observing it.

After a while Pier said, "Say, now that ye're here, how about helpin' me pick out some heifer calves. Some a those I picked last year got an udder no bigger'n an apple."

Âlde Romke beamed. And led the way to the calf pens.

The nine o'clock curfew bells were ringing faintly in the night when Pier and Âlde Romke threw down the extra hay for the animals and the winter birds.

Pier hummed the words:

"To bed, to bed, my children,
To bed you go, amen.
You've hung the stars,
Torn the moon,
Played your wars,
Dropped your spoon.
O! it's time to go to bed, children."

It was midnight, and they were drinking the last of the sweet aniseed milk when Herman Brackx stopped by for the old couple.

He came heavily through the door, thrusting his fat belly into the room. He said, smiling, "G'morn."

Âlde Romke waved a hand. "Sint Steffens hoarn!"

. 2 .

The fattener check came the last week in January.

And though Nertha was expected to get her pains any minute,

Pier, bulky in his red-and-blue mackinaw and one-buckle dress boots, said to her, "C'mon, woman, get yer glad rags on an' we'll go get our Reo an' take a spin through the country."

She held back, wary. "It won't run us in the ditch?"

"Naw. Course not. Look who's drivin'."

"That's just it."

"Ho." He laughed. "C'mon. Otto Grimovich will be along any minute now to take us to town, so get going, lady." And patting her, he bundled her up in a brown plush coat and woolen muffler.

In Starum, he agreed to the terms and signed the contract for the Reo, displaying in his signature one of the few lettered skills Nertha had managed to teach him. His name, *Pier Frixen*, looked like a neat row of little blue twigs. He got behind the wheel, listened to Blacktail's instructions, and, with Nertha sitting stiffly beside him, drove off in the shiny black Reo with the pig-snout nose. He drove around the block a few times, testing himself, and then, brave, headed the car toward Âlde Romke's cottage to show off.

Âlde Romke, astounded that Pier had bought it after all, in a daze, let himself be talked into going for a ride too. Ma Lysbeth wouldn't come. The old man crawled onto the hard leather cushions in back. Inside the upthrust sheepskin collar, his fright-wide eyes twirled like an owl's.

Pier headed for the country. He drove slowly. The road was rutty. A few inches of dirty snow lay in the ditches and on the fields.

He smiled, drunk with power.

He laughed at Nertha's and Âlde Romke's fears.

He climbed the hill south of town, past Red Bluff. He shifted gears carefully. The motor roared up, shaking the stiff new car.

He drove past Kaia's place. He blew the horn, looked for her on the yard. He drove past Red Joe's, hit the horn a dozen times. He sat stiff-armed behind the wheel, his head held high.

He drove the car slowly, ten miles an hour on the level, fifteen down a hill.

Nertha cowered beside him. Covertly she watched him fiddle with the dashboard buttons. She drew her brown plush coat close around her lump-heavy body, buried her hands nervously in her woolen muff.

Âlde Romke sat tight and silent.

Pier drove on a few miles, then turned back.

Driving past Kaia's again, and seeing her on the yard through a screen of leafless lilacs, he yielded to an impulse to give her a show too. He stepped on the gas. The new Reo sputtered, took hold, roared. And trundled forward. It began to sing down the hill toward Starum.

There was a choking sound in the rear seat, a gulk. A quick hand was on his shoulder. "Soan, kinst him hâlde?"

Pier turned his head a little. "What's the matter, Pa?"

"He ain't runnin' away?"

"Shucks no. How kin he? I got a hold a him, ain't I?"

"Well, he's going pretty fast."

"Why, we ain't goin' more'n twenty miles an hour."

"Ae."

"Ye're not scared, Pa?"

The old man grunted.

Pier stepped on the gas a little more.

Again the old man's hand was on his shoulder. "Soan, you sure you can hold him?"

"Why, Pa, this ain't no horse. This is a machine."

"Well, it runs fast enough for one."

"Oh, come now, Pa. You know it can't talk."

"It's talking back here."

Pier grinned and roared up the motor even more. The exhaust blasted quick loud snaps of sound.

The old man muttered to himself. "Ya! It moat mâl, oars is 't net moai."

Nertha began to squirm.

"Now what's wrong with you?" Pier asked, looking askance at her.

"Pier! Slow it down."

"Why, this ain't fast."

"Slow it down! Or I'll get out."

"Aw . . ."

She made a move toward the door.

"Ho. This ain't fast. Just wait'll we really get goin'."

The hill dropped steeply. Pier pushed the foot feed to the floorboard. Fearlessly, smiling, he held the steering wheel stiff-armed in gripping mittened fists. "Now I'll show you what 'fast' really is,' he said. "C'mon, you Reo you, let's fly once."

The shining black car bouldered past Red Bluff looming on the left. It shot down the hill. Bits of snow and loose gravel clattered up against the rear fenders. Sparks flew. The motor sang. Fence posts came stitching toward them. The telephone wires between the poles dipped and lifted like flying swallows.

Nertha, trying to hide herself from the world that came rushing up at her, ducked behind the dashboard. Âlde Romke sat cramped, gripping the side of the seat.

Out of the singing hum of the motor there suddenly arose a new sound, a rattling drum. It rose, and abruptly broke into a *spit-spat-spit;* then a crashing clang; then a tearing sound. Up before Pier's amazed eyes flew dark objects. The engine hood bent back as if rammed by a rising cannon ball. There was a chunking sound, and the motor died.

Pier pulled hard on the brake lever. The car shuddered.

Pier hopped out of one side of the still moving vehicle while Nertha and Âlde Romke scrambled out of the other. Pier ran a short way and then stood his ground on the shoulder of the road. Nertha ran into the ditch, mewling with terror. Âlde Romke clambered white-lipped through a fence into a snow-filled field.

The car stopped dead.

When everything had quieted, Pier approached cautiously. He walked around the Reo once, dared a peek inside. He lifted the torn hood.

Before him lay a desolation. Some bursting force had blown out the whole top of the new Reo engine. Pistons lay around like severed balled-up fists.

"See," Nertha screamed from the ditch, her teeth chattering, "see, I told you! But no, you knew better. Sure. You big fool you." She climbed heavily out of the ditch. "You big fool. I've had enough rides from you. I've had enough for the rest of my life. I'm goin' home." She stepped past him, reached into the car for the bag of groceries, and went cumbersomely up the hill.

Pier dropped the hood and ran after her. "Hey, woman, it ain't my fault it blew its belly. The goddanged thing. Really."

"You didn't have to drive so fast."

"But, Nertha——"

"You're always goin' too fast. Rushin'. Always." Her eyes glinted repressed fire.

"But . . ."

"'But' nothin'. I'm goin' home where it's safe."

"But really, Nertha, I . . . Besides you can't walk that far. The baby . . . you know."

"I don't care. I'm not going to ride that thing again." She stepped on.

"Judas Priest."

She turned. "Yes, swear, you fool. Swear."

Pier stood still.

She went on a few more steps, began to cry, her head bowed over her groceries and swollen belly.

Pier threw up his hands.

He saw Âlde Romke shivering in the field and called, "Hey, where do you think you're going?"

"Me? Where else but back to the safety of my frou?" Âlde Romke crawled through the fence and started hastily down the road, casting worried glances at the wrecked car.

Pier scratched his nose. "Wait up a bit. I think I'll walk along."

"What?"

"Blacktail's give me a ninety-day guarantee an' he's gonna make good on that lemon. An' if he don't, I'll stick the goddanged thing right down his throat."

"You're not going to get another one?"

"Sure."

"You ain't had enough of cars?"

"No."

"Soan, if I was you, I'd call it quits."

"Quits? Not me, mister. I ain't gonna let a little thing like that throw me."

· 3 ·

Pier banged open the door of the garage. He saw instantly that Blacktail was about to put on his hat and coat and lock up for the day. "Just a minute, mister," Pier called out. He took a deep breath, noticing as he did so that the oily garage still had the old smell of the livery stable. "Before you go home I want to peel an apple with you."

"Oh?" Blacktail's dark eyes flicked open for a second, then nearly closed. "What's up?"

"Man, you sure stuck me with a pile a junk."

"How so?"

Pier thrust the guarantee under the other's nose. "Look. Does that still say the car was guaranteed ninety days?"

Blacktail backed a step. Cautiously the lean man took the folder. He sat down on the edge of his brown desk. He flipped through the crinkly paper, looked at Pier, at the paper, at Pier again. "Well, it does say something about ninety days all right. Why?"

"Wal, sir, maybe that Reo was stylish but she wasn't built to last."

"What?"

"That's it. Mister, that Reo ruptured her guts. Got the diarrhea. It come out all over. Front, back, everywhere. It tore holes in her skin big enough for colts to crawl through."

"Frixen, you raced her."

"Hell no. I just drove her. I took my pa and my wife out fer a little spin and drove her. An' then she blew up. Blew up like she had the bloat."

"Frixen, you must have done something wrong."

"I drove her easy. Like I said."

"Where's she now?"

"At the foot of Red Bluff."

Blacktail scratched his black mustache. "How fast did you drive?"

"Oh, thirty."

"Lord, man, I told you not to go over twenty-five. At least not until she had a thousand miles behind her."

"Wal . . . but what about the guarantee?"

Blacktail muttered to himself. He fingered the edge of the brown desk.

"How about it, Blacktail? I've got chores to do."

"I can't help you today. I just haven't got another Reo here."

Pier glanced through the garage. "What about that Buick there?" He pointed to a new, sea-green 1918 touring model.

"I thought you was sold on a Reo?"

"Not no more. I should a known better in the first place."

"Huh."

"Besides, it just comes to my mind now that Dr. Helder's got a Buick. An' docs are usually pretty smart about cars. They have to be."

"Huh."

"Wal?"

Blacktail lifted an arm, let it fall. "Look. Why don't you go home and think this over for a couple of days?"

"Don't you want the profit?"

"Sure. But . . . why throw your money away on cars when you can double it somewheres else?"

Pier narrowed his red brows. "Where?"

"The Drake Estate."

Pier grunted. "Uh-huh. I knew you'd get around to me someday. Mister, this fish ain't bitin'."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Look, Blacktail. Be thankful that I'm still willin' to trade with you."

Blacktail rubbed his mustache. "Okay. Have it your way. Besides, it's nothin' out of my skin. It's the company that's going to get the minking on this deal. It's they who've got to make good on the guarantee."

Once again Pier drove down the rutty, snow-gray street.

He saw Herman Brackx standing in front of the Beer & Billiard. When he came near, Herman Brackx waved at him. Pier braked and pulled up to the curb. "Hi, Herman. What's on yer mind?"

"C'mere. I wanna see you a minute." Herman Brackx came down from the steps and put a foot up on the running board. His fat belly rested on his knee. A wind tugged at his leather flap cap and his worn sheepskin. "Say, I see you got a new car."

"Yeh. Ain't she a beauty?"

"Right."

Pier twirled the steering wheel back and forth a little. "Yip, nothin' better'n a Buick."

"Yeh, they're pretty good. Must a cost a pretty penny."

"A lot of 'em."

"Uh-huh."

"Yip, a beauty."

"Say, Pier, I wanna see you private a minute. I was gonna talk to you the night I picked up the old folks, but it was gettin' late."

"Herman, I can't see you now. I got my chores to do. Besides, my old lady is ready to pop any minute. An' I got a heifer in the same condition. No, I can't."

Herman Brackx opened the door of the car. "Aw, c'mon. They kin wait. But this can't. C'mon inside a minute. I wanna show you something."

Pier reluctantly shut off the motor and climbed out.

Herman Brackx waddled into the Beer & Billiard ahead of him and led him behind the cigar counter where, jammed against the showcase window, a desk was stacked with papers, tobacco containers, and empty snuffboxes.

"Sit down," Herman Brackx grunted.

Pier sat down and crossed his long legs. Coming in from the cold outdoors, Pier felt hot. He unloosened his red-and-blue mackinaw.

"Snuff?"

"Nope."

"Don't know what ye're missin'." Herman Brackx pushed a pinch into his upper lip and sucked up another into his nose. "Hintth! Tastes good." Then, putting the box of Copenhagen away, he put on a pair of glasses and began fumbling around in a pile of loose papers. "Let's see. Got it here somewhere. Had it this mornin'. H'mm. Yeh. Here it is." He unrolled a stiff paper bristling with ornate scrolls and a signature. "Here." He thrust it into Pier's hand. "Read it. See fer yerself. I ain't one to push a thing at a man, but this is great stuff. Safe. Safe as the American dollar. Specially now that the war is over an' prosperity is around the corner. A prosperity greater than even God intended."

Pier fumbled with the thick document. He paged as if he were skimming through it. "What the hell is it?" he muttered, wondering what the marks really meant.

"Read it."

"Judas Priest, Herman, I ain't got time." Pier thumbed through several more pages. A few numbers and dollar signs were scattered through the text. These he could read. "Heck, it'll take me too long to go through all this. And besides, by the time I get to the end I'll probably've forgot the beginnin'."

"H'mm. Well, I tell y'u what, Pier. This is a dead-cinch thing to make some money on. The Great Northern Harness Company. Up in Minneapolis. A friend a mine's invested all he's got in it. An' he's really makin' dough."

"Y'u got yours stuck in it too?"

"Some."

"Uh-huh."

"I tell you somethin', Pier. I know fer a fact that it's got a three-million-dollar capital. See there, where it says it? Aw hell, man, you can't go wrong. It's as safe as the guv'ment. Harnesses is always gonna be in style."

"That's true."

"An' here's the best part." Herman Brackx leaned over his stomach and pointed a dirty, cracked finger. Beneath the fingernail spread a dull purple clot of blood. "They pay ten cents on the dollar."

"Say, that's pretty good," Pier said, suddenly catching at something he understood. "Why, the bank only pays six."

"See what I mean?"

Pier nodded.

"Pier, you just can't go wrong on this."

Pier gave in and took eight hundred dollars' worth of Great Northern Harness Company stock. And once again that day he traced out his signature, a neat row of blue twigs on a piece of paper.

· 4 ·

Pier found Nertha sitting at the kitchen table, still dressed in her going-to-town clothes. With a stubby pencil she was checking the grocery list.

"Huh," he said, pushing back his blue cap, "I see you got home all right."

Nertha nodded without looking up, intent on her figuring. Each time, before she put down a number, she wet the point of her pencil with the pink tip of her tongue.

Pier stood breathing loudly before her, glad to see that she hadn't been hurt by the wild ride and the long walk. "Wal," he began, "wal, I sure made that bastard Blacktail crawl."

She nodded, went on writing.

"I sure tol' him a thing er two. Told him something he won't long forget."

"Uh-huh."

"Say, what in blazes're y'u doin' there?" He loomed over her. "Huh." He grunted. "Wal, did y'u catch him cheatin' y'u this time?"

Nertha wrote down another figure, thought a moment, bit on her pencil again, suddenly stood up. A triumphant gleam lighted her

eyes. She brushed back her silver-blond hair, brushed her hips. "I knew it, I knew it," she exclaimed. "That little snotnose Willie Rexwinkel did it again. The cheat."

Pier laughed. "How much?"

"Seventeen cents."

"Judas Priest. That makes us broke. You know, you wimmen, you an' Ma Lysbeth, the whole shebang, ye're all alike. One day you'll give the pants off yer behind to some poor bum begging at the door, give him king's food and king's clothes, an' pray for his soul, an' the next, raise a turrible fuss about some poor tired store clerk who makes a penny mistake."

"Willie Rexwinkel ain't a poor tired store clerk. He's a crook. You've said so yerself." She lighted the pulldown lamp.

"Yeh. But that still don't take away that y'u wimmen are funny."

She flung her shoulder at him and took off her winter coat.

'Wal, does it?"

She offered no comment. She went into the pantry and began to make supper.

Pier looked out of the window. Evening had come.

He muttered to himself, "Wal, I guess it's time to juice the cows." Sighing, he got into his work clothes.

He lighted a lantern. He swung out into the darkening night. From the woodshed he picked up the milk pails and a five-gallon can.

He walked across the yard. A few flakes of very light snow floated around him. He entered the soggy barnyard. Despite a freezing wind, the yard had been kept soft by the feet of cattle and horses. It bubbled like pap beneath his four-buckle boots.

Entering the barn, he clanged the milk pails down behind the cows and hung the lantern on a nail in the beam above. The dim barn lighted up. Shadows retreated into corners.

He was in the feedbin getting corn meal when he heard a low moan. He stood still a moment. Again the low moan. Exclaiming, he ran for the lantern, crawled through a stanchion, and dropped into the pen beside Princess.

She was lying on her side. Her once naughty eyes were dull blue with pain. The calving gallop had come upon her. Already a mauve-white knob of flesh protruded from her. He cursed to himself. While he had been gallivanting around in his new car, she had started to calve.

He set the lantern to one side on the yellow straw and leaned over to examine her closely. He patted her, stroked her.

He sat up and nodded. Yes, there was no doubt of it. She was going to have a tough time of it. Too small. Damn Âlde Romke anyway.

While he watched her, another clutch of pain gripped her. She dropped her head to the straw-covered floor and groaned. Her belly heaved like a leaping hound. Then she quieted. And lowed.

Pier stood up. Gently he pushed straw around her. He swore. The next time he saw Âlde Romke he would give the old man a piece of his mind.

He went back to his choring. He finished feeding the cows and brought the yearlings a tank of water. He fed the horses some hay and called them in from the outdoors. He went to the hog house and fed the young sows.

Coming back from the hogpens, he picked up an old rusty pail, bedded it with a handful of straw, and gathered up two dozen fresh eggs in the chicken coop. A brood hen refused to leave her nest. Pier caught her by the neck and tossed her squawking onto the white mounds of dung beneath the twig chicken roosts. She ran back and pecked at his red boots. He grunted.

He returned to the barn. He picked up a pail and his battered, dung-spattered stool and eased himself under the cow Maybelle. He punched his head into the side of her belly. With his nose comfortably full of her skin smells, he fitted the pail between his legs and began pulling her tits. *Ping-tish. Ping-tush. Ping-izzell. Ping-uzzell. Sjt. Sjt. Bruzt. Bruzt.*

A shrill call brought his wandering mind up short. Princess? Nertha? He listened.

He heard it again. It was Nertha. He popped up from between the cows, throwing his stool one way and splashing the milk pail the other. He bounded outdoors through the dark. His milk-wet hands felt chill.

He found her curled up on the floor by the stove. There were black shadows under her closed eyelids. "Nertha girl, what . . . my girl."

Her lids opened. She looked at him with milky eyes.

"Now, girl, now, now." Gently he picked her up and carried her through the living room into the bedroom, the very room where

Ma Lysbeth had whelped him. Just as he leaned over the bed to lay her down, she buckled in his arms, almost slipped from him. "Girl, girl," he murmured. "Now, there. Easy now." He managed to get her on the bed. Her dress had come up over her knees and modestly he drew it down. "I'll run over to Red Joe's an' call Dr. Helder from Rock Falls. That all right?"

She did not answer.

With fumbling fingers he lighted the night lamp on the dresser. The glow came up like a small spreading yellow cloud.

She lay quiet. In the light she looked at him with numbed eyes.

"Just you lay still now, Nertha girl. I'll hurry an' call the doc. That all right?"

She nodded.

"Good girl. I'll be right back."

He ran out of the house. He bounded across the yard into the corncrib where he had parked the car. The engine started at a touch. He backed out, whirled around, and swung dizzily up the rutted lane.

Her numbed eyes haunted him. "If she dies," he murmured to himself, "if she dies, I'll never fergive myself." He drove madly up the road.

He groaned. "An' I should have known better than to take her for a ride today. Known better." He recalled that the night before he had cautiously put his hand on her rising belly, had felt the enfolded child stirring. It was like troubled bread dough rumpling.

The headlights of the car nosed whitely ahead into the dark. They lighted up the gray cedar fence posts and the ditches to either side. The motor purred. The foot feed felt alive. It was like a sharp spur in the side of a horse.

He rushed past the crossroad, went on east. The telephone poles came up grayly, rushing.

Red Joe's windbreak of leafless ash and willow came toward him like a row of bare arms and elbows growing grotesquely out of the belly of the earth.

He slowed, and turned into the lane. The car lights swung across the yard like two long gleaming needles. They drilled into the darkness. They speared, in a flash of white-yellow, one after the other, the low many-windowed chicken house, the red granary, the gray cattle shed beyond, the long low barn, the wooden barnyard fence,

the water tank, a warty box elder, a long plank sidewalk, and at last the house. Pier stopped by the walk.

Only one window was lighted up in the house. The glow came yellowly through the frosted pane. Pier guessed they were all in the kitchen.

He pounded on the door.

It opened, light pouring upon him. It limned Red Joe in the doorway.

After a moment of surprise, Red Joe's jaws snapped together. "Why, come in, Pier." Red Joe brushed back his blond hair. "You look worried."

"Hi," Pier began, "I . . ."

"Who is it?" asked a tired voice.

"Why, goddammit, it's Pier, Edna!" Red Joe exclaimed. He turned to Pier again. "Y'u in trouble?"

Pier swallowed.

"Who did you say it was?" Edna asked again. Her voice ached with fatigue.

Pier stepped inside. "Hello, Edna."

"Oh, it's you. Hello." A tumble of blond children suddenly whirled around the supper-laden table.

Red Joe closed the door. "Sit down, man. Take a load off yer feet. What's wrong?"

Pier looked around dazedly, took a chair, and coughed. The children gaped at him. He took off his cap and hooked it over his knee.

"Want a cup a coffee?" Red Joe asked.

"No, thanks." Then he blurted, "Red Joe, what d'you think, my wife's calvin' an' my heifer's gettin' a baby!"

For a second Red Joe's face held still. His eyes whirled. Then he laughed. "Yer wife calvin'?" He glanced at Edna. "That's the best I heard yit."

"Joe!" Edna snapped.

Red Joe blinked.

"The children," she said.

"Oh. Yeh." Red Joe turned to Pier. "Well, what kin we do fer you?"

Pier rose from his chair. "I mean, Nertha is in a bad way, an' I come to call Dr. Helder. Kin I use yer phone?"

"Sure thing. He'p yerself." Red Joe pointed to an awkward, brown telephone hanging on the wall. A battery box browed above a flat, black mouthpiece.

Pier hesitated. He had never used one before. He stood before it. "How d'y'u . . . ?"

"Here. I'll do it fer y'u. You want Dr. Helder t'Rock Falls?"

"That's right."

Red Joe closed his eyes, thought a moment, turned the little black handle a few times. He lifted the receiver. "Central?"

There was a hoarse, metallic sound.

"Say, Central, this is Red Joe. Get me Rock Falls. Long distance. I want Dr. Helder."

There was a scraping sound.

"Mrs. Helder? Wait a minute. Here's somebody wants to talk to y'u." Red Joe motioned to Pier.

Trembling, Pier grabbed the receiver and began to stammer into it.

"Here, here, the other way," Red Joe instructed, laughing. "You talk into this thing, hear out a here."

"Oh." Pier put the receiver to his ear and yelled, "Hello? Hello? This Mrs. Helder, the doc's wife?"

"Yes." The voice was a faint scratching in his ear. It startled him, and filled him with inward wonder.

"Wal, say, this is Pier Frixen. We got a . . . my wife Nertha, she's sick. I mean, she's gettin' . . ." Pier stopped, and, looking at Edna, motioned at the white-haired children.

"Git," Edna said abruptly, "git, y'u kids. Git into the dinin' room." She herded them out. Their eyes were pop-wide with questions.

Pier continued. "Wal, y'u see, my wife's on the way t' . . . I mean, a baby's comin'."

"Oh, I see." The faint voice cleared. "I'll tell Dr. Helder right way when he comes in. He's out on call just now."

"Uh-huh. All right then. But be sure to tell him. Tell him to hurry. You'll tell him, won't y'u? It's her first one."

"Oh yes. Don't you worry. Tell me, where do you live?"

"Southwest a Starum. You go south a town an' then when ye're past Kaia's there——"

"Who?"

"Kaia's."

"Oh. Look. Just tell me how many miles this way and that way."

"Wal, we live one mile south an' a half mile west a Starum."

"Good. I'll tell him. Thank you for calling. And don't you worry now."

"All right then."

"Good-by."

"Good-by."

Pier, still holding the receiver to his ear, jumped when a click snapped in it. "Wal, I guess she's done talkin' now," he muttered.

Red Joe took the receiver and listened. He nodded. "Well, what'd she say?"

"He was out."

"He's comin', though?"

"Sure." Pier ran his fingers through his red hair. "Judas Priest. I sure wish he could come right away. She needs a doc bad. You should a seen her, man. She was all doublet up when I left the house."

"Now, now," Edna murmured at his side. "She'll be all right. Shall I go along an' help till the doc comes?"

"Would you? I'd sure appreciate it. I don't know nothin' about such things when it comes to wimmen. Cows, yes. Sure would appreciate it if you did."

"D'y'u suppose we ought to get Kaia too?" Edna asked.

"Why . . ." Pier thought a moment. And then abruptly decided against the idea. It was none of Kaia's business. Besides, her coming would just give Alde Romke another chance to go howling around about her putting a hex on the kid. "No. Just you's enough." He put his hand to his head. "I should really get Ma Lysbeth, but, heck, shucks, I don't feel easy about gettin' her. Besides, she might get bossy again."

"I know."

"Say, that reminds me. I forgot to call the vet'nary."

"You mean Old Dad Taylor?" Red Joe asked.

"Yeh."

"Why, he's dead."

"Not old Dad?"

"Sure."

"Well, I'll be a son of a bitch!" Pier said, suddenly letting himself go. "So he's dead. Wal, that's too bad."

"Yeh. He died about a week ago." Red Joe sat down on a chair and

pointed for Pier to take one too. Red Joe tried to cross his short bowed legs, found he couldn't, put them up on another chair. "Say, Pier, maybe I kin help you. I had a little trainin' at vettin', y'u know."

"Think you could help Princess? She's a yearlin' that shouldn't be yeanin'."

"Sure."

"Good. You come along then too."

Red Joe nodded and stood up. "Edna, send them kids to bed. Search 'em for matches. Lock 'em up in their bedroom. An' then get yer duds on."

They found Nertha sitting at the living-room table, writing. "What in the name of heaven are you doin' up?" Pier demanded, incredulous.

She smiled. She was pale.

"Ain't you got them poppin' pains no more?"

"Not right now."

"What you doin' up? Git in bed."

"I'm just writing things down that's gotta be done when I'm down."

"Judas Priest, woman, can't you tell them to me?"

"Well, I might die." She looked down.

"Oh, land alive, woman, you'll be all right. Ye're a grown woman, big." He paused. "You feel all right, don't you?"

"Sure."

Edna stepped forward. "Pier thought I should come, Nertha."

"Oh good," Nertha said, brightening.

Edna turned toward Pier. "Well, you two can go now. Better go to the barn an' see what's up there. Nothin's gonna happen here fer a while yit."

In the barn Pier led Red Joe to Princess's pen. "See," he said, "see, she's too young."

"She does look that."

"An' she's tired."

Red Joe nodded reflectively. He lifted a leg and broke wind with a blast.

"Think she'll make it?"

"Can't say." Red Joe stepped to the medicine cabinet hanging on the wall near the fly-spotted calendar. He searched through it.

"What y'u lookin' fer?"

"Lysol. Some 'septic."

"Here." Pier rummaged through a few shelves and found a red can. "Here. Take this. Need hot water?"

"That'll be the clear thing for it."

"I'll get you some."

Pier picked up a pail behind the cows, ran to the house. He popped into the kitchen just as Edna was about to take the hot-water kettle off the stove.

"Hey, I need that."

"Is that so."

"It's fer Princess. She needs it. She's havin' a helluva time."

"Since when has cows come ahead a wimmen?"

Pier drew back. Once again he was surprised to see how abruptly Edna could change from a whining creature to a weasel-snarling mother. "Wal—"

"She ain't gettin' any."

"Jumpin' Joseph, woman, remember, this is my house!"

"I know, but right now, Nertha comes first."

"The hell you say. Look, that heifer's dyin' in the barn there. Right this minute. You said yerself Nertha didn't need help so quick."

"Wimmen first!"

Pier leaped forward, grabbed the kettle from her hands. The spout guggled. Sizzling water spilled on the floor. "You go fill a pot, lady. I need this right now."

Pier ran outdoors, re-entered the barn. "Just think, them damned wimmen wasn't gonna let me have this hot water."

"Edna?"

"Yeh."

"Beat her up?"

Pier started. "No."

"Should've. Damn bitch needs it once in a while."

Pier laughed uneasily. "Wal, now what?"

"Pour it in there." Red Joe pointed to a pail. Some yellow powder lay on its bottom. Red Joe began to undress his arm and shoulder.

"Goin' inta her?"

"Yip."

Red Joe bathed his arm in the treated water and then lay down on his side behind the heifer. Slowly he entered her. He grunted.

"Feel anything?"

"Yeh, I think so. Ain't sure though." Red Joe grunted and worked a few minutes. Then he withdrew. "Hell, you look around in her once. I ain't sure."

Pier undressed his right arm and shoulder, bathed them, and lay down on his side too. He entered Princess. She was slippery and warm inside. A whistle of urine spilled over his bare shoulder. Its warmth shocked him. A smell of salt water arose.

"Kin you figure her?"

"It's twins. An' twisted."

"That's what I thought."

"Wal, now what? Turn them around?"

"That's it."

Pier grunted and worked around inside the heifer.

Princess groaned. Sometimes she lifted her head to look over her shoulder at them, sometimes rested it on the straw floor.

She convulsed, jarring Pier. "Judas Priest. Things sure fly inside her when she heaves," he gasped. He felt around. "Say, I think I got it now. They're comin' around."

From somewhere came a rending scream.

Pier tightened. He raised himself up on an elbow. "That from the house?"

"I think so."

"Judas t'Priest. Now I suppose the wife's rippin'. My God, did you ever see a man in such a mess? Next thing you know I'll be throwin' a bunch a pups myself."

Red Joe yipped a little laugh. "If you plant pups you get pups."

"Mister, you said a mouthful that time."

Again a piercing scream rent the air.

Pier drew out his arm and jumped up. "Dammit, I can't stand this any longer. I'm gonna see what's up."

"Probably twins there too."

Pier stared, nodded. "Twins, twins. Pa and I ha' been huntin' for a twin-throwin' heifer ever since I kin remember, so we could double the herd, get two fer the work a one, an' by jiggers, here all in one night I get two such critters." He washed his hands hastily in the treated water, drew on his shirt and leather-lined mackinaw again.

He ran to the house.

He entered the kitchen with a rush. A strange feel was about. He slowed. He brushed into the living room. "Nertha. Edna. How . . . ?"

"Shhh . . ." someone hissed at him from the bedroom.

There was a voice. "That you, Pier?"

"Yes . . . girl."

"Pier. Oh, Pier. It's so big, oh, I'm afraid it's gonna be a monster."

Pier jumped. "Don't be nuts, woman!" He swallowed. "Woman, you must a put on yer moonhead to talk that way."

"Pier, be kindly to her now," Edna said, peeking through the door for a moment. "She's out of her head."

"Oh."

Again a scream. It seared him. "Girl, girl," he murmured.

Another tortured shrilling rose.

Suddenly, crying, laughing, he ran from the house.

He burst into the barn.

Before he could say anything, Red Joe growled, "Take it easy, jingle-britches, take it easy. You act as if you never had calves before."

"But it's my wife. My own wife who's hollerin'."

"Hell, man, my wife let out a yell once that froze the water in every river on the Equator. But she came through. Take it easy."

A car drove on the yard.

Pier stepped outdoors. Two twisting, turning shafts of light burned on the yard. A voice came out of the glowing headlights. "This where Frixen lives?"

"That's it." Pier stood blinded.

A figure was suddenly beside him. The man was tall, thin, and his face owlish wise and old. "Your wife . . . ?'

"That's right. If she ain't dead already."

"H'mm. Well, well. Then I better hurry."

"Shall I come with?"

"No, no. Find yourself something to do out here."

"That won't be hard. My pet heifer Princess is calvin'."

"H'mm. Seems to be catching around here."

"I'll say. You see, Doc, she was bred too early."

"Most of 'em are."

"But I mean the heifer."

"I know."

"Oh."

"Just you take it easy, Frixen. And as soon as everything's shipshape in the house, I'll come out and have a look at your young Princess."

"Be much obliged if you did, Doc."

Dr. Helder reached inside the car, picked up a small black bag, shut off the lights, disappeared.

Pier stumbled back to Red Joe. "That was the doc. He'll fix her up."

"Maybe you should a sent him here first."

"She worse?"

"Worse? Say, she's not only trying to throw twins, she's throwin' out everything she's got. Guts, lungs, stomach——"

"Judas Priest!"

Two hours later, the door of the barn opened and Dr. Helder stepped in. His eyes were twinkling. "Well, now. And how are you boys getting along?"

Pier got to his feet slowly. His eyes were gray and wide with fatigue. "Terrible." He cleared his throat with a hawking cough. "Did . . . ?"

"Yessir. A fine baby boy. A fine one."

Pier's stomach churned. He started for the door.

"Now, now. Just a minute. Edna's still cleaning up there."

"Oh."

"Yessir. An eight-pounder. And by the looks of him, he'll be the spittin' image of his old man. Got light hair already."

"An' Nertha?"

"She's fine too. In fact, she wanted to get up. I had to tie her down in bed."

"That woman!" Pier exclaimed admiringly.

Red Joe stood by, beaming too.

"Now, what's the trouble here?" Dr. Helder looked at Red Joe's makeshift gynecological instruments: a broom, a leather strap, a pail of treated water. "What the hell is that stuff?"

"Why, that's what we're tryin' to pull it out with. An' that's lysol water."

"I don't believe it," Dr. Helder muttered slowly. "I don't believe

. . . here, lads, I'll give you a hand." Taking off his coat and shirt and underwear, and opening his bag, he went to work on Princess.

An hour later, two heifer calves were stumbling in the pen beside Princess.

"It's amazing to see how human animals can be," Dr. Helder said, half to himself. He washed his hands in the treated water.

"I'll say," Pier agreed.

"Well, Pier, you've had a good day. A boy, and twin calves."

Pier nodded.

Red Joe said, "Yeh, Pier, I didn't think you had it in you."

They grinned.

Dr. Helder put on his clothes. "Pier, Princess may not be very happy right away. Probably won't be able to stand up for a couple of hours, but she'll be all right."

They stood looking at her. They watched the calves nudge her bag as it lay bulging on the straw floor. Sometimes the calves came near enough for her to lick their feet.

One of the calves fell down. Princess lowed. With anxious eyes she watched the calf get to its front feet, then its rear. When the rear came up, the front fell down.

The men laughed.

"Well, I've got another call to make, boys. Be seeing you," Dr. Helder said at last, his keen eyes lighting up in his gray face.

"Thanks fer comin', Doc. Fer comin' so quick. How much will it all be?"

"Oh, make it ten and we'll call it square."

"That sounds good to me." Pier took his deep leather purse from his pocket and paid him.

"So long, boys."

"So long. Take it easy."

Dr. Helder stepped outdoors and in a moment drove off.

Pier carried the afterbirth away before Princess could get to it and eat it. And after the calves had had their fill of her, he milked out what was left and brought the beestings to the house. The pink blood-clotty milking would make excellent rusks. And would be a delicacy in the coffee.

"Jumpin' Joseph, will Alde Romke be proud," Pier said to himself. "A son, and twins."

· 5 ·

But there was yet to be a ripple of trouble.

A week later, christening day came. Red-lipped, white-haired Domeny Beckstrom, Old White Wings of Dell Valley Himself, had been asked to perform the ritual. With Beckstrom came Old Dad Roel, Nertha's father.

And neighbors from all around came: Ol' Spit Triggs and his wife Slop-hole Gertie; the bachelor Grimovich brothers, George, Otto, Peter; the Brandt boys; and others. Kaia, too, came, walking over the fields, a black witch rising out of the earth.

Some had not yet arrived: Âlde Romke and Ma Lysbeth, and Âlde Folkwâlda, all three of whom were coming with Herman and Minnie Brackx in Herman's new Ford; and Red Joe and Edna.

In the kitchen the teakettle simmered.

On a little sideboard in the living room stood two bottles of whisky, a few bottles of beer from Âlde Romke's cellar, a decanter of dandelion wine, a pitcher of boerekofje, and some small glasses. The big table was laden with brown rusks smeared with running yellow butter and sprinkled with fine white sugar.

The parlor, used only for special occasions—weddings, funerals, Christmas—had been opened up for the christening. The curtains were raised, pouring in light. The plain ivory-colored wallpaper glowed. The straight-up chairs, the heavy center table, the waxed mahogany organ, the gold-framed portraits of stiff-cheeked ancestors, usually buried in month-long dusk, shone brightly. A fragile fern waved slowly before the south bay window. The air was full of folksy talk. Faint curls of cigar smoke rose to the ceiling.

In the bedroom off the living room gay blue presents for the boy were scattered over the bedspread.

A commotion arose on the yard. Pier jumped up. He went into the kitchen, looked out, saw Red Joe and family arriving in a horse-drawn surrey.

Pier stepped outdoors. A gentle winter wind breathed on his face. The two-inch film of snow on the ground glistered in the steady-eyed sun and stung his eyes.

"Hi, neighbors. Glad to see you, glad to see you," he murmured,

flushing, his eyes dancing. "Go right in, Edna, an' take off yer duds."

Edna nodded and with the children whisked into the house.

Red Joe hitched his horses to a pole near the woodshed and came bowlegging up the sidewalk.

"Great day to be alive, ain't it?" Pier exclaimed jovially.

"It sure is. No two ways about it."

Pier watched Red Joe come toward him, and chuckled. "Red Joe, tell me. How come you never grew up?"

Red Joe grinned. "Well, I tell you. I'm like the calf's tail. I grew towards the ground."

Pier laughed and opened the porch door to let Red Joe lead the way into the kitchen.

They met Old Dad Roel, who had just come out of the parlor through the living room to get a drink of water at the kitchen sink. The old man's lean gray head smiled out of a stiff white collar much too large for him.

"Dad, I want you to meet my friend. Red Joe Faber. Red, this is Nertha's pa. Old Dad Roel."

"Glad to meetcha."

"Meetcha."

Red Joe, head to one side, his eyes at once merry and shrewd, studied Nertha's father.

Old Dad Roel coughed. "Ain't it a wonderful day?"

"Sure is."

"It's wonderful the way the good Lord gives us these sunny days. Makes living wonderful. Makes it good. Crisp. Good breathin' air. Right good."

Red Joe nodded.

"Too many people in the world complain about what the good Lord does, but I never do. I take what He sends me."

"Uh-huh."

"Course, I got sympathy fer the poor an' so."

Red Joe's lips twisted. "You sound like a preacher, Dad."

"Oh no. I don't preach. I leave that to White Wings." Old Dad Roel's long, black-veined hand pointed toward the parlor where the women had collected around the pink-wattled domeny like hens around a cock dandy. "No, I'm not that religious." The old man coughed apologetically. "Say, Pier, I've just made the acquaintance of Otto Grim . . . Grimo . . ."

"-vich."

"Yes. Otto Grimovich. Was surprised to find he thinks like me. Fer socialism. Co-operatives. Course, don't get me wrong, I'm fer right genuwine Jesus religion too. I'm fer that. But I don't think it's right fer people to let other people starve. There's plenty here for all of us. Plenty. God give us this earth together." He paused as he noticed Red Joe's stilled face, his darting observant eyes. "Ain't it a right wonderful mornin'?" He coughed. "Well, I came in here to wet my whistle . . . get a drink a water." The old man went to the cistern pump and dipped a glass of water from the pail and drank.

Though Pier didn't understand the old man's theories, he liked him. "Ain't he wonderful, Red Joe?"

Red Joe nodded.

Pier said, "Wal, take off yer coat an' make yerself t'home."

Red Joe slipped out of his sheepskin and hung it on a peg behind the door.

Pier pointed to the parlor. "Let's see what's goin' on in there."

They stepped across the living room. Womenfolk were ringed around Nertha. She was holding the baby in her arms, her face shining with smiles. She nodded to compliments. The infant's face was a blob of wrinkled red wrapped in blue.

Pier said, still feeling foolish, as he offered Red Joe a cigar, "Say, Nertha, how about givin' my new hired hand a glass a beer?"

Nertha's green eyes opened. "You mean, our baby?"

"Sure."

"Oh, don't be silly, man." She drew the child close, instinctively covering its face with an edge of the blue blanket.

"Aw, Nertha, after spending nine months in jail, I'm sure he'd appreciate a glass of beer. I know I would."

"Oh, don't be so funny."

Pier noticed a sudden pained silence in the room. The women were looking furtively at Domeny Beckstrom. "What's the matter, did I say something wrong, Domeny?" Pier asked.

White-haired, red-lipped Domeny Beckstrom tolled his head disapprovingly.

But Ol' Spit Triggs, peering out of the living room where he sat beside the hard-coal burner, spat yellowly into the coal bucket and said, "Huh. That's the best I heard yit."

The slim Brandt boys grinned, puffed on their cigars. The Grimo-

vich boys, their sunflower seeds forbidden them in the house, swallowed, and shuffled their feet. Red Joe rolled back in his chair, chortling.

General laughter sudsed up; waters returned. The uneasy moment passed on.

Pier said, "Wal, if the little jigger can't have any likker-sauce, it don't mean we can't, does it?" He glanced challengingly at Domeny Beckstrom.

Domeny Beckstrom looked to one side, permitted a pinched smile to break his sleek face, nodded slowly. "In its place, Pier, in its place. You know."

Red Joe grunted and said, "I'll take a drop or two, Pier."

"Me too."

"An' me."

"Count me in."

"Well, not me," Old Dad Roel said.

"Why not?" Red Joe asked. "You a Lutherfoot?"

Old Dad Roel looked down at his veined hands. "No. No. It ain't that. I just like to keep my head clear."

Just then the popping sounds of an engine running on three cylinders came from the yard. Pier looked out of the bay window facing the lane. "Ha. Here they come at last. Pa, Ma, Âlde Folkwâlda, Herman, an' Minnie. Now we kin start." He hurried to the door. "An' look at the presents they're bringin'."

Behind Âlde Romke and gray-shawled Ma Lysbeth came Herman and Minnie, and tubby Âlde Folkwâlda, trundling along. Minnie's face was so fat that once she smiled it stayed set for the day.

"Welcome, welcome. Come in. Hi, Pa. Hi, Ma. How be you?"

"Good. Perfect good. An' you?"

"Good. What's the matter, Herman, break down that ye're so late?" Pier asked, grinning. His hair and face flamed in the sun.

"Well," Herman Brackx growled good-naturedly, "my Henry wouldn't Ford today."

"Get a good car, why don't y'u? Buy yerself a Buick."

"Well, I ain't a rich man like you." Herman Brackx unfastened his coat and his belly bulged forth.

Âlde Romke tugged at Pier's elbow.

"Yeh, what is it?" Pier asked, at the same time nodding to Ma Lysbeth and wondering again what could be inside that windbelly

of hers. It was so large her coat parted over it. "Yeh, what is it?"

"I want to see you in private, soan."

"Okay." To the others Pier said, as he opened the door for them, "See you inside."

When the door closed after them, he turned to Âlde Romke. "Wal?"

"Pier, have you picked the boy's name yet?"

Pier coughed. His face clouded. "Wal, Pa, I tell you. You see, it's Nertha who's got the right a namin' the first baby. At least, that's the custom in her family."

"Well, an' what'd she say it was to be?"

"Theodor."

The old man paled.

Pier said hastily, "Wal, don't look at me. I held out for something else."

The old man grunted. "I bet."

"No, really, Pa. I wanted to name it Jesse James."

"Wo' dammit! That's even worse."

"Oh no. Jesse James is an honorable name, Pa. He fought the rich. He befriended the poor. He was kind to wimmen an' children."

"Bah!" The old man tugged at his red-gray, arrow-sharp beard.

Pier stiffened. "Besides, Theodor ain't so bad. Teddy Roosevelt had it an' it didn't keep him from gettin' into the White House."

Âlde Romke's wild eyes flamed up. "Pier!"

"Dammit, Pa, I'm gonna tell you something. It's our business what we want to name the kid. An' if you don't like it, you kin lump it."

"Pier, I've had enough of your snetterjen. Enough." Âlde Romke turned away.

The door opened behind them. It was Nertha. She asked, "Now what goes on here?"

"Nothin'."

"Fightin'! An' on Theodor's christenin' day too. Aren't you two ashamed?"

"Wal, Pa, he—"

"Never mind. Come in the house. Both a y'u." She paused. "I just knew there was something wrong when Pa didn't come in the house with Ma."

But Âlde Romke stomped away from them, the low crotch of his trousers hobbling his legs, muttering to himself, saying, "Lit it him

nou mar oerkomme, Âlde Han. Lit it him nou mar oerkomme. Ik waskje myn hannen fan him ôf."

. 6 .

First a heavy winter rain and then a heavy snow came.

Beneath it, Pier snuggled under, he and his wife Nertha, and his son Theodor, and his stock, the cattle and horses, the calves and pigging sows, the chickens, and a little collie puppy he had bought from Red Joe.

Inside the warm barn Pier readied the harness for the coming spring. Inside the granary he cleaned the grain, in the crib he graded the corn.

Once, idling, he whittled his name and the date on a doorpost: PIER FRIXEN 1919.

In the warm house, Nertha was strong again. She bathed and fed the limp baby, cooked and baked, and patched Pier's overalls.

One morning, sitting in the kitchen with her and puttering with the churn, he looked up and asked suddenly, "Nertha, have you noticed that funny feelin' too?"

"What feelin', Pier?" She glanced up from her darning, startled. The needle and its white thread in her fingers stilled. Her pale green eyes held his steadily. She brushed back a fallen silver hair.

"Wal, it's . . . I dunno. Somehow, I got a feelin' that all these blessings we got . . . wal, what I mean is, we got 'em too easy."

"Why, Pier."

Pier narrowed his eyes, trying to catch the fleeting idea. "I mean, we didn't deserve 'em. It was like gettin' something for nothin'."

"I don't know what you mean, Pier," she said, her free hand brushing her thigh.

Pier scratched his red hair and hitched up his trouser leg. "Wal, I dunno. Things came awful easy this year. No drought, nor nothin'." He fumbled with the top of the churn.

"But, Pier, you worked hard."

He took out his pipe and filled it and lighted it. "Wal, I dunno. I'd be careful how I'd say that."

He was sure he had been too lucky. Any time a man got a big strapping son and twin calves on the same day, especially if both the

boy and the calves were the first of new lines of blood, he had better expect a turn for the worse. Life had a way of evening things up.

Nertha returned to her needle. "Ach, you an' yer silly notions."

"Wal, maybe I'm nuts." He shrugged. He looked up at the ceiling. "But, yet, I still got that funny feelin'. Like something hangin' in the air."

"Ach, man, be thankful with what you got. Don't go beggin' for trouble."

BOOK TWO

THE ÂLDE HAN SMILES

1. SEED

. I .

SUMMERS WENT BY AND THE SIXTH WAS COMING UP.

During those five years Pier managed to hold his own. Some years he made a little money and spent it fixing up the place, rebuilding the chicken house, reshingling the hog house, and repainting all the buildings—the house cream, and the others blood red trimmed in white.

He also found time and money to fix a new overhead granary in the corncrib, strengthening the old crib by doubling the number of uprights and joists and crossbeams with well-dried lumber, and using the old lumber from the wrecked granary for the new bins. To get the grain up in the bins he bought a secondhand yard elevator

at a farm sale. From then on he hauled grain to town at his leisure; using gravity to fill the wagon.

He spent some of the gains in changing the breed of hogs. He had never fancied the red Hampshire. They were too quick for him. They ran like hounds. He preferred the heavier and slower Poland China. The new breed developed enormous layers of fat out of very little food. However, they had one drawback. The sows had trouble throwing their young at yeaning time.

The most daring adventure during those five years occurred in the fall of 1919, a year before the postwar recession set in. Excited by the shrill little cries of his baby boy, stirred up by the land-buying fever of the time, he gambled and bought a farm near Philosophy, South Dakota, a few miles west of the Big Sioux River. He had saved up enough to pay for half of it despite the high price per acre, and got a mortgage from the Starum Bank on the home farm for the rest of it. He bought the farm against the advice of Âlde Romke, who warned him that the interest would eat him up, and that, in the end, he might even lose both farms. But Pier felt sure he could make up the difference with one good crop.

Pier had some bad years too. One year, right after he had made his prairie raft shipshape, a hard wind blew down all the corn. Most of it rotted before he could get around to picking it up. Another spring, a severe dust storm tore up the young oat sprouts on the east rise of the house. Still another year, a drenching downpour gorged new ditches in his land and deepened old gullies. And the year previous, an early frost had soured his corn and made it doughy.

Thus, by the time 1924 came along, with growing Theodor going on six and already going to the Starum Grammar School a mile and a half away, Pier began to long for the one good year when everything would turn out as planned. It was high time he cleaned up the mortgage on the new farm so that his first-born and any other boys that might come along would have something to look forward to when they grew up. His boys were going to be free.

And it was high time too that he lay up a little nest egg for himself. In his old age he was going to have money in the bank.

. 2 .

Time entered the last three days of March. The month had been cruelly cold and excessively cloudy, with the descent of days finally falling into a beating, drizzling rainstorm.

To Pier, however, the month was a godsend. For once there had been enough time to finish the winter chores. For the first time since he had started farming on his own he found himself waiting for the land to soak up enough rain and to be awakened by an April sun.

Yes, this spring it looked like a good year was coming up. All the signs were there. He began to dream of a bumper.

He whistled as he chored. He played with Theodor. With fond hands he tousled the boy's hair. It was still white from last year's summer sunning. He gave the quick lad errands to do. The little fellow was willing, and always ready for more. Pier called him his hired hand and playfully warned him not to fall into the slipshod ways of Âlde Han, ways to be shunned more than sin.

With daylong patience he taught the boy how to care for the calves, the little pigs, the chicks. He taught him to love the land. Often he repeated for the lad the fable of how the earth opened its ears and eyes in the summer, and how in winter it slept beneath the snow.

The boy had trouble pronouncing "Theo" and called himself "Teo." Laughing, Pier picked it up, nicknamed him Teo.

Rain came churning up out of the draw west of the barn, turning and twisting, whipping the box elder, spretting wild rattling drops on the wavy windowpanes. Sitting by the west window, Pier thought the house a ship, cracking and creaking in the wind, tossing and lifting on the waves, boring its way across the prairie waters.

He combed his red hair, in which already a few white hairs were appearing, with nervous fingers. He drew his shirt collar close around his neck, tossing his shoulders cozily inside the heavy winter shirt and underwear. It was good to be in the house this chilling, rain-soaked day.

And good, too, was it to have Âlde Romke and gray-shawled Ma Lysbeth here. With a returning neighbor they had ventured out over the slucky road to pay them a visit.

Ah, in the kitchen here they were like bugs snuggling under a warm rag rug. There on the far side of the table sat Nertha darning, strangely absorbed in herself. There, across from her, sat Ma Lysbeth, peeling potatoes, sometimes smiling, sometimes clutching her windbelly against the quick-biting pains that flitted through it. There, by the north window, mused Âlde Romke, white, and very bent and old with his eight and seventy years of living. And there lay Teo, on the floor, paging through a magazine about machines. It was good. Again Pier rolled his shoulders deliciously inside his warm clothes.

A wood fire tumbled in the fire pot of the kitchen range. The chimney grumbled pleasantly. The windows whanged as the wind sucked at the house.

He looked out across the yard toward the hog house. He complimented himself for having rebuilt the structure. The northwest cold could not touch the worm-soft pigs snugly sucking the sow dugs.

Pier was pleased to see that Âlde Romke's attitude toward the lad had changed. For two years after the christening, the old man had refused to see the boy, or talk with him, or have others mention his name in his presence. But then one day it happened that Âlde Romke appeared in the doorway to transact a piece of business with Pier. The old man needed some money to purchase a new net for his river seining. Teo had been playing on the floor when the door opened, and looked up at the gray old man warily, and smiled, and then ran up to him and threw his cub arms around the old man's leg. The old man's face worked. He muttered. He rolled his light blue eyes. He wrestled with his pride. Then at last relented. Later on, when he discovered that Dr. Helder had said Nertha might be barren for the rest of her life, he became doubly interested in the boy.

What had really melted Âlde Romke's heart was the time the little tike had tried to pronounce "Grampa." One morning, as the old man sat musing and sunning himself on the east porch, Teo, just three, stumbled sleepily up to him, rubbing his morning-glory blue-green eyes and ruffling his skim-milk-white hair, and murmured, "Mo'nin', Damfo." Âlde Romke sputtered, and, laughing, told Pier that the boy was the only soul alive who dared call him a "damn fool" to his face. When "Damfo" changed to "Grampap," the old man was even more pleased. It was the last touch, and helped Âlde Romke forgive Pier for not having taught the boy to say

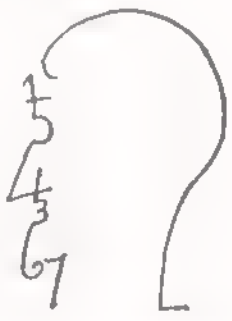
"Pake," the Frisian for grandfather. Yet, through it all, the old man did not once use the boy's name, neither Theodor nor Teo. He dodged it by calling him Sonny.

The rain outside continued to spit against the window. The wind tugged at the house, first this way, then that, like a puppy worrying an empty shoebox. Pier snuggled inside his clothes.

Again looking out, he noted mentally that he still hadn't fixed the windmill ladder. Someday somebody climbing it would break his neck. Pier sighed. Wal, tomorrow he had to try to remember to fix the rotted rungs.

The old man and the boy had begun to play. The old man asked, "Can you draw me a picture of a true Frisian, Sonny?"

Teo cocked his head to one side. A smile ran back into his pink cheeks. He pulled a suspender tight over his narrow, child shoulder and scratched his patched knee. His overall was patterned after Pier's. Wetting a stubby pencil, he drew the figure of a man's head with the numbers from one to seven:



"See?" exclaimed Teo, holding up the paper.

The old man beamed.

Pier laughed. "Good, boy. Perfect good." Pier remembered how he had learned to draw it too, years and years ago.

Teo asked, "Grampap, what do them numbers mean, Grampap?"

Alde Romke coughed and played with his white, pointed beard and toyed with his burned-down pipe. To protect his toothless pink gums, he had taped up the stem of his pipe. He rolled his eyes importantly. "They mean a lot, my boy, a lot."

"Aw, I bet you don't know, Grampap."

"Not? Well now, boy, I——"

"What's a true Frisian, Grampap?"

"A true Frisian, Sonny, is what you are. Ae."

"Where do they come from?"

The old man puffed slowly for a moment, his eyes dreamy. Then, hunching up, he began. "Sonny, once a long time ago, before Christus came to this earth to save us sinners, a certain Kening Adel lived far away in a far country, far away by it strân fan 'e Ganges, in a country where the people considered the cow sacred."

"A black-and-white cow, Grampap?"

"Oh sure. The gramma of the cows we got now. Well, this Kening, he was of the people of Shem, Noah's soan. An' he had three soans, Friso, Saxo, an' Bruno." The old man puffed steadily. "Well, at last there came a time when his people began to starve. The sun burned the fields, the fish in the river died, the birds flew away. There were just too many people for the little food there was."

"Is that really true, Grampap?" The boy fixed his light blue-green eyes steadily on Âlde Romke.

"True? Sonny, do you doubt the word of your Âlde Romke?"

"No, but . . . is it true, Grampap?"

Pier broke in. "That's it, boy. Don't let him feed you any gooseberries."

The boy's face wrinkled momentarily with irritation. Crawling up beside Âlde Romke on the chair, he asked, whispering, "Is that true, Grampap?"

The old man's eyes teared. "So says it Fryske folk."

"But who are they?"

"Well, they are my pa, en myn pake, O, al it Fryske folk."

"Uh-huh."

Pier chuckled. Absently he noticed that the rain outdoors had changed to sleet. A coat of white appeared on the side of the red barn.

"An' then it came to pass that Kening Adel ordered lots be chosen to see who should leave the land. Well, after it was all over, Kening Adel found that the lot had somehow fallen to his own soans, Friso, Saxo, an' Bruno. The Âlde Kening hated to do it, but he had to give his soans the order to go. That was their lot. An' so they left, in three hundred ships, big ones, with sails. They sailed an' sailed, an' finally"—the old man raised his eyes as he readied the next falling blow of the story—"they landed yn Grikelân, yn it lân hwer Alexander de Greate was Kening. Alexander fed them, gave them water to drink an' grapes to eat, an' gave them homes to live in. An' it

came to pass that pretty soon Alexander began to like Friso, as if he were his very own soan. An' he gave him a woman to marry, a nobleman's daughter. Her name was Hil. An' everything went good, an' all were happy."

Âlde Romke looked out of the window, dreaming. "But then, ae, once again pestilence an' hunger came. An' Friso, Saxo, an' Bruno, they had to sail on. This time, because so many of their people had died, they needed only twenty-four boats. They sailed an' sailed. Sailed many months. Finally, at last, they landed on the shores of the North Sea. They built a city there, an' they called it Starum, because, Friso said, the great god Stavo had saved them from the black seas an' brought them there."

"Did Saxo and Bruno land there too?"

"Oh sure. Later on Saxo fathered a people called the Saxons. An' Bruno the Brunswicker."

"An' then what happened?"

"Well, of course, Friso himself had children, many of them. An' they filled the land. A soan Gruno became the father of the Groningers, Jutto the Jutlanders, Hetto, after marrying a Kat princess, the father of the Hessians."

"Is that all true, Grampap?"

Again Pier laughed. At first the old man's talk about the Old Country irked him, but thinking it over he decided to let the old man ramble on. Âlde Romke was getting old and had to be humored. Besides, one day's talk wouldn't keep the boy from becoming a real American. "That's the boy, Teo, don't let him spin you windies. Make him walk chalk."

"Is that true, Grampap?"

Pier grinned. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the driving sleet had become snow.

Âlde Romke said, "So says it Fryske folk."

"Uh-huh. What else?"

"Well, so then there was Schottus. He married the daughter of the Kening of the Danes, an' settled in Skotlân."

"Boy, that Friso, he sure had a lot a kids an' grandkids, didn't he?"

Pier chuckled. Nertha and Ma Lysbeth laughed too.

"That he did, Sonny, that he did. But then, he was a real man."

Pier coughed.

"Why, once, after his children had multiplied into hundreds, ae,

thousands, he had to send a delegation to Rome to ask Caesar for more land." The old man cleared his throat. "But they never got there." He shook his head as if he had bad news.

"Why not? They all drown dead?"

"No. No. It was this way. Halfway there they ran out of food. So, they settled right where they was, near it Switserlân. An' pretty soon they liked the new country so well they decided to live there forever. The neighbors called them the Helveten, because they'd gotten only healwei, or halfway, to their goal, Rome."

"Grampap, that ain't fish, is it?"

Âlde Romke chuckled. "So, back in Âlde Fryslân meanwhile, more children were born, an' finally there got to be so many, Friso had to pick out druids, teachers, to keep the kids out of trouble."

"Teachers like my teachers in school?"

"Ae."

"Oh." Teo played with the old man's beard, combing it with his pink fingers.

Âlde Romke clapped out his pipe in the palm of his bony hand, threw the curd of tobacco into the slop pail under the sink, refilled his pipe, and lighted it. "An' then came the bad times, real bad," he said sadly.

"Did they get hungry again?"

"That's just what happened."

"Why didn't they pray God for food like them children a Moses did?"

"Ae, that's what they should have done. But they was heathens."

"What's that?"

"People who don't know there's a God."

"Huh. They must a been dumb."

"Ae."

Pier looked out of the window again. The wet snow on the windowpane had turned to reddish brown. Some flakes were pink, some rusty. Pier wondered idly if some ruddy dust from the southwest was mixing in with the snow.

Âlde Romke sucked on his noisy pipe. "Well, once again some of the folk had to go. Once again lots were cast. An' those that were chosen got all their possessions together, an' sailed the seas. Black. Alone. They sailed many months. At last, they landed in America."

"This America? Ours?"

"Ae. An' remember, this was long before Columbus sailed the ocean blue."

Teo nodded solemnly. His eyes turned a little, as if he were checking the story against the facts.

"Why, an' they even landed in Mexico!"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course!"

"Uh-huh."

Alde Romke beamed. "An' more lots were cast in Fryslân, according to the law. This time it fell to the lot of Hengist an' Horsa, sons of Udoph Haron, to leave the country. An' they went. An' they landed in Ingelân. There they met Kening Vortigen, a Briton. He said, 'Hey, where do you fellows think you're going?' An' they said, 'Why, we're Free Frisians. We're worshipers of Wodan an' Freya. An' we'd like to be friends of yours.' 'Huh,' said Vortigen, looking them over. 'Ae,' they said, 'we are true Frisians an' honest men.' 'Uh-huh,' said Vortigen. He looked them over some more. He saw they was big strapping men, that they could fight. 'Well,' he said, 'well, I tell you. Right now I'm having trouble with them dummed Scots.' 'Oh well,' said Hengist an' Horsa, 'that's simple. We'll take care of them for you.' An' they went out an' whipped the Scots. Well, after the battle, the boys asked for a reward. 'How much do you want?' Vortigen asked. 'Oh, a piece of land to live on about the size of a bull's hide. A hide of land.' 'Ho,' thought Vortigen, 'that's going to be cheap pay.' An' he said, 'Go ahead, measure it off.' So Hengist an' Horsa, they killed an' skinned a bull, an' they took the hide an' cut it into strips, an' made a long thin string out of it. This they laid out in a square, an' claimed all the land inside it. 'Hey,' roared Vortigen when he saw how big the piece was, 'I only agreed to a piece of land about the size of a bull's hide, not a half-dozen meadows.' 'Sure,' said the boys, smiling, 'sure, but nobody said anything about what shape the bull's hide was to be in all in one piece or in a long strip.' 'Hmm,' said Vortigen, an' he shut up. The boys had him." Âlde Romke's eyes glistened triumphantly.

"Say, how come you know so much about that?"

"From It Âlde Bock."

Teo studied him.

"An' from Blacktail. You see, I've been having some talks with

him lately an' he tells me that just where Hengist an' Horsa got this hide of land is where his father the earl was born. In Kancastra."

"Oh."

Pier himself was a little dumfounded at the ease with which the old man slid from under the pinning questions. "I suppose Admiral Sir Francis Drake was born the same place?"

"Ae."

"Wal, I'll be a monkey's uncle."

"Anyway, an' then Vortigen, he got mad. Secretly he armed some men to kill Hengist an' Horsa at a powwow. But Hengist, he was a sharp man. He got wind of it. An' so he told his men to carry knives under their clothes to the powwow. An' they drunk mead, played games, chewed the rag gen'rally. When Hengist saw they wasn't getting anywhere, he jumped up an' gave the signal"—Âlde Romke leaped from his chair to demonstrate, holding aloft his age-withered arm, at the same time dropping the startled boy to the floor —"an' Hengist yelled, 'Nimath ure saxa!' Ae, an' before anybody knew what was happening, they had killed off every last one of them dirty buggers. Kening Vortigen an' all his dummed men."

Teo scrambled up from the floor and crawled back on the old man's lap. The boy breathed nervously, his eyes white with excitement, "Yeh, an' then what?"

The old man sighed, and relaxed. "That's all there is to it."

"Did they go back to Fryslân?"

"Oh no. They became boss of Ingelân."

"Well, an' then what happened to Friso then?"

"Oh well, he kept ruling his people. He built a temple an' called it Tamfane. He kept a crown an' a red flag in it. He got them from his Pa Adel, who got it from Pa Ragan, who got it from Pa Shem, who got it from Pa Noah."

"What good did that do?"

"Well, they worshiped there, an' then that helped them fight their battles, helped them free men from the bishop's dungeon, helped protect the men from hexes."

"What else did he do?"

"Well, he made an emblem with a picture on it showing lilies in the water. Ae, just as the lilies reach down into the water for their soil, so the Frisians reach down into the North Sea for their land."

"Say, Grampap, is it true a hex leaves ashes in her footprints?"

"Ae. An' they make little boys blind."

"Ha. That's what I told Jimmy."

"Jimmy? Jimmy who?"

"Red Joe's Jimmy, of course. Don't be so dumb, Grampap."

"Ho. Well, you just tell him for me that Grampap said so too."

Pier broke in, "Now, Teo, don't you think you bothered your Grampap enough for today?"

Teo looked at the floor, stubborn.

"Really, Sonny. Besides, them's nothin' but bughouse fables he's tellin' you anyway."

"But they're fun though, Pa."

Âlde Romke grinned and glanced triumphantly at Pier. He relighted his curve-stem pipe. His baggy eyes narrowed. "Want to hear more, Sonny?"

"Sure."

"Ae, an' there was Redbad, a great fighter. He only had a small army but he was the most feared man in all It Âlde Lân." The old man sighed. "There was only one thing wrong with him. He was a heathen. He served foreign gods. Wodan, Thor, Freya, Fosite. All of them. Too bad."

"Wasn't he saved, Grampap?"

"Oh no. Well, he was almost saved once, just about. An' that happened this way. Right after Pepin's Franks had beat him in a battle, Bishop Wolfran got holt of him. He told him about the glory an' the kingdom of God, told him about Jesus, how He came an' died so that all men might be saved. Redbad thought that was pretty good. He liked it. Bishop Wolfran told him that if he wanted to be saved, he had to be baptized. Redbad didn't think that was so bad either. So Bishop Wolfran got the baptism bucket ready. Well, then it happened. Redbad had his foot in it when he thought of something. 'Say,' he asked, 'say, before I do this, I want to know what happened to my âldfaers, to my father, an' his father, an' the father of my fathers?' 'Why,' said Bishop Wolfran, 'why, they went to hell of course.' 'Oh,' said Redbad. 'Oho. Well, if Walhalla was good enough for them, it's good enough for me.' An' he took his foot out of the bucket again."

"Then what happened?"

"I dunno, Sonny. Nothing, I guess."

"Say, Grampap, is it true that if you kill a cat, tomorrow you'll find the hex dead too?"

"Say, where did you hear that?"

"Jimmy told me."

"Ae. It's true. Hit a cat in the leg, an' the next morning you'll find that the hex's leg has turned black an' blue too."

"Did you ever try it?"

"Ae. Once I kicked a cat in the eye, an' sure enough, the next day Kaia had a black eye."

"Hey," Pier exclaimed, "that's goin' too far, Pa. You don't want to spoil her in the kid's mind."

Ma Lysbeth brommed too. "Ya, Pa, don't wake sleeping dogs. Specially if it's only because you're still jealous that Âlde Folkwâlda beat you to her grandmother, that flirt Nala."

Âlde Romke waved a protesting arm, reddened.

"Yeh, Pa," Pier said, "come, come, let's have a little brotherly love for our neighbors."

Âlde Romke jumped up, once more dropping Teo to the floor. "That's the trouble with you, Pier. You're too soft. You've been ruined by all these false gods of Amerika. You don't believe in the true Christ no more. You don't believe in the old ways, in the things your elders taught you. You don't believe in nothing. An' I tell you, it's a dirty beek shame."

"Horse collar."

Âlde Romke pointed a wavering finger. "Ae, an' I tell you, Pier, I tell you, we Frisians here in this country, we're going to the dogs. It won't be long before we'll be swallowed up by these Americans. Become nameless nobodies. We ain't hard like we used to be. Why, in It Âlde Lân, why, we hated the world our enemy an' we loved our family. But you, you love the world an' hate your——"

"Shut up."

"Soan, I deman' respect."

Pier faced the old man. "Do you think that kid understands all them bughouse fables ye're tellin' him?"

"He ain't a true Frisian if he don't."

Teo looked uncertainly from one to the other. He shrank back against the stove.

Nertha said, calming, "Now, now, you men. Quiet down now. An', Pier, let Pa tell them stories. It won't hurt Teo none. It keeps the boy busy. Besides, I kind a like to listen to 'em myself."

"Bah!" Pier exploded.

"Pier," continued the old man, "Pier, I tell you again. The time will come when we Frixens as Frisians will disappear from the face of the earth. An' all because of you. You don't care to keep up the old ways."

"An' why should I? The Frisians ain't any better than anybody else we know. Besides, we're in Ameriky now, an' we're Americans."

"Ae, an' heathens. An' condemned to hell-fire."

"Now, Pa," Ma Lysbeth warned again, this time shaking the peeling knife at him.

Pier said, suddenly remembering something, "Say, Pa, them Frisians a yern, were they always so high an' mighty?"

Âlde Romke raised his white, bushy brows. "An' when wasn't they?"

"Remember that Norman door you wanted to build into the house here? Right there by that window where ye're sittin' now? Remember the fight you had with the carpenter? How he said it was silly to have the door to the north with the kind of winters we get in this country?"

The old man looked down at his feet.

"Sure." Pier winked at Teo. "Let me tell you that story, boy. You see, once, years ago, the Danes beat the pants off the Frisians. An' they became their bosses. An' they made the Frisians bow down to them, mornin', noon, an' night. An' when the Frisians wouldn't do it, they fixed it so they had to. The Danes boarded up all the doors of the Frisian houses, an' cut into the north side of the house, facing Denmark, an' built a door so low that, when the Frisians wanted to go out, they had to duck. That's how them Danes, them men from the north, got them Frisians."

Âlde Romke stamped. "That's not the truth, Pier. An' you know it. That door was first built in churches so that when the domeny began to roar an' thunder, the devil could get out. Later on, the people themselves built them in their houses, so that when the head of the house began to thunder an' pray, the devil could get out there too."

"Oh, horse collar."

"Besides, the Frisians got the Danes later on. Greate Pier came, an' he fixed them. Ae, Pier, Greate Pier, the man I named you after. Ae. The man whose name you have disgraced."

"B.S.!"

Âlde Romke turned to the boy again. "Ae, Sonny, Greate Pier was a wonderful man. He beat up the Danes, he killed the Bremer, he whipped the Hamburger, an' made martyrs out of the Hollander. A great man. An' a grime man, too. When he got mad, you couldn't look him in the eye, he blinded you so. His eyes were like balls of fire. As big as turning suns. An' he was strong. So strong, he could carry a barrel of beer in either hand. Sometimes, to keep the barrels from banging against his legs, he stuck a ball of Frisian cheese under each armpit. Ae."

Pier angrily jerked his chair, pulling himself closer to the stove.

The old man waved his hand. "Why, once, after he'd retired from the wars, an' had gone back to his farm again, five armed Saxons came galloping up to where he was plowing, aiming to kill him. They asked, 'Can you tell us where Greate Pier lives?' Greate Pier studied them, an' laughed a little to himself, an' he nodded a little, an' he said, picking up his plow by the tail an' pointing it, first at the village where he lived an' then at himself, 'Dèr wennet er, hjir stiet er.' "

"B.S.!" Pier exploded again.

The old man, suddenly tiring, sat down again. He filled and lighted his pipe. He sighed.

Teo went up to him again. "What else, Grampap?"

The old man tousled the boy's hair. "Ae, an' you're a good bernsbern to ask that. Perfect good." He patted Teo again. "You want to hear more?"

"Sure."

"What do you want to hear now?"

"Oh, tell me about that smart man, Bernlef. That prophet who was blind."

"Ae. Well, my boy——"

"Grampap, kin you prophesy?"

"Of course. Ae."

"Prophesy then once, Grampap. I'd like to hear you prophesy."

For a moment there was only the sound of wind-blown rain on the window.

"No, my boy. Not now. No."

"Please, Grampap."

"Well, to tell you truth, boy, I'm afraid of my predictions. They

always come true. All of my silent predictions an' my spoken prophecies always come true."

"Prophesy once, Grampap. I wanna hear it."

The old man shook his head. "No."

"Please."

"Sonny, what I have in mind, I can't tell you."

"What's it about?"

"No."

"Where's it gonna be?"

The old man sighed. At last, reluctantly, with a quick throw of eyes at Pier, he said, "Yn it grêf."

"The grave?"

The old man nodded. "Ae, it grêf is open for someone."

Pier jumped up. He kicked away the chair he sat on. "Pa, now I know ye're nuts."

Teo stared fascinated at the white light in the old man's eyes.

· 3 ·

Swollen was the eastern sky when he awoke. The village bells were calling:

Cleng! the sun is dæwning strong.

He rubbed his eyes.

He slid quietly from bed to let Nertha sleep some more. He stood up and yawned. He picked up his corncob pipe from a chair and punched his finger into the bowl, pressing down the few good kernels of tobacco still in it. He scratched a match under the seat of the chair. He puffed a few times and then slipped off his nightshirt over his head, his pipe still boiling up smoke. He growled a little to himself. Ever since he could remember he had hated nightshirts. But Ma Lysbeth had forced him to wear one when he was single, and now Nertha when he was married.

Sitting naked, puffing, he felt the unusually chilly, dry May air breathing over his skin. He shivered. His knees came together. His rump muscles tightened. He hunched forward, still drawing on his pipe. He picked up his summer wear and speared his legs and arms into it. He pulled on his socks and his shirt. Standing up, he thrust a leg into the overall, then the other, caught up his slippers with his

toes, and, picking up the alarm clock, tiptoed through the living room, buckling his suspenders as he went.

The kitchen was cold too but he soon had a cob fire going. He put on his blue cotton cap and his lined jacket. He leaned over the stove, putting a long leg over and onto the reservoir in back. Heat spread upward and warmed him. Little puffs of gray smoke squirted out between the round stove lids. He opened his jacket. The hot air swirled into his clothes. He rocked back and forth on one leg, humming. He refilled his pipe.

The hot-water kettle began to sing. Without moving from his split stance, he poured the heated water into the coffeepot and set it up front to boil.

He awakened to the world about. Gloomy thoughts misted up in his mind. He ceased to hum.

Things were not going good. Not good at all. While March had given him plenty of moisture, April had been as dry as an old cow's tit. And now, the last week in May, the oats he had spilled over the land a full six weeks ago were only just now coming out of the ground. Many of the needle-like seeds lay dead in the dry soil. Two days ago a parching southwester had come up, blowing off topsoil, picking up seeds and blowing them God knew where. And the seed corn too lay cold in the ground. And the pasture grasses, the hayland stand, the garden greens, slept sluggishly in the chilly sun.

Pier shook his head. Seed was sown in the soil, but nothing came up. Seed was sown in Nertha, and nothing came of it. Both remained barren.

He wondered if he were at fault. He considered the notion. He cocked his head first this way, then that, thinking.

And, yes, even the cows had been acting funny. Some threw dwarf calves, some bald whites, some full blacks, and some stillborn. Only a few threw what he wanted, the checkered black-and-whites.

He wondered if it was time to change the bull. Maybe Alde Hengist had run out of good seed.

He snorted as he thought about it. A man could get a new bull to fix the calving situation all right, but what could a man do to fix the boy situation? That was a little different. You couldn't change a human bull. And a Christian to boot. He grunted again. For all the results he had had in trying to catch Nertha he might

just as well have been a steer. Perhaps Dr. Helder had been right after all that she would never be a mother again.

The warming stove below interrupted his sour thoughts. He dropped his leg to the floor. He loaded some wood into the fire.

The coffee had begun to simmer, and he put it on the back of the stove. He set out the cups and spoons, the creamer and sugar.

He stepped around the table to the door of the living room and called, "Nertha, coffee's ready!" and called up the stairway, "Teo, time to get up!" He listened until he heard a muffled rustling in both the bedroom and upstairs, then returned to the stove. He poured out a cup for himself, creamed it, sugared it, and sat down in his armchair, sipping and blowing the steaming drink.

He looked out. There would be a dry overcast again today.

Wal, maybe a man should feel thankful for clouds even if they were dry. It kept the frost away. Two days ago, with a clear sky, the morning had broken over the land with a crisping frost.

He heard Teo move in his bed in the room above, heard the boy's feet hit the floor.

A few moments later, quick feet began to patter down the steps. Then there was a slithering purr as the lad slid over the edges of the last few steps. Then a thump at the bottom. "Mornin', Pop."

"Mornin', Sonny."

"Do I get a cup a coffee this mornin', Pop?" Teo's white hair, turned by the pillow in the night, lay parted off to the wrong side. "Do I, huh, Pop?"

"No, not yet."

"But you said I could as soon as I was yer hired man."

Pier laughed. "Wal, you can have a glass a milk. Otherwise you'll get red hair."

"Like you, Pop?"

"That's right."

"But I'm really your hired man already, Pop. You know that."

"No, it's milk fer you, boy."

"But I don't like ma-mem no more."

A glow rose in Pier. The mists began to leave his mind. "Wal, pretty soon you'll get coffee, Sonny, just like the rest of us."

Teo sat down on the edge of a chair, his overall suspender barely hooked over his thin shoulder. He blew his nose and mumbled to

himself. "Aw shucks, I know I'll never get to be as big as you, Pop, an' so I'll never get coffee. I've been tryin' all week to grow up, but I just can't do it."

Pier grinned.

Teo, his mind changing faster than it takes a leaf to fall to the ground, ran to the stove and, sitting on the floor, pulled out both Pier's and his shoes from underneath the oven where they had been warming during the night. He tossed the big shoes to Pier. "Here, Pop, put on yer clodhoppers. It's time to chorse." Then, grunting and pulling at the strings, he drew on his own.

"Well, Pop, what're we gonna do today, huh, Pop?"

"Oh, I dunno yit." Pier tied up the last shoe and sat up.

"Ain't you made plans yit, Pop? It's Saturday, you know, no school, an' I kin help you. We kin do a lot today."

Pier trembled inside. What a lad. "Wal, Sonny, I been thinkin' maybe we better dock the young he-pigs."

"Sounds like a good idee. Yeh, that's a real good idee."

Pier chuckled to himself. The boy wouldn't know what he meant by docking, but the boy wouldn't ask. Oh no. He would wait patiently until the operation began. Then his sharp little eyes would take it all in.

"Say, Pop, is Red Joe coming to help?"

"Yeh."

"Oh, then Jimmy kin come too, huh, Pop, huh, Pop?" Teo, big for his age, was as tall as Jimmy.

Pier laughed. "I'll ask his Pa."

The slow clipping sound of Nertha's steps in the living room came to them. Both became silent, wondering what mood she would be in today.

She stepped through the door, her back to them. She turned, and with a twisting shrug, threw her long silver-blond hair away from her forehead. It rippled from shoulder to hip.

Pier said cautiously, "Mo'nin', Nertha."

"Mo'nin'."

Teo said, looking up from the floor, "Mo'nin', Ma."

Nertha turned. Her green eyes were vague with apathy. Slowly she ran her hand over her hip, smoothing down the uneven texture of her gray-blue house dress. "Mo'nin', Sonny."

"Say, Ma, ain't this gonna be a nice day fer work, huh, Ma?"

A slow, internal thought stirred behind her face, at last became a wan smile. "I guess so, Sonny."

Instantly Teo leaped to his feet. "C'mon, Pop. We gotta get goin'. Time to start the day."

Nertha began to make up her hair.

Red Joe had come with his sharp knives. With him came Jimmy, also white-haired. Jimmy had the sly eyes of his father. And today he had a cold. Continually he licked at the slope of his upper lip with a quick, pale tongue.

Before the two men began to castrate the young spring males, they built a runway in the big east door of the hog house, facing the morning light. At the end of the runway, they fitted a V-shaped trough on a workbench. One man was to hold a pig on its back in the V while the other was to snip off the knots of seed.

The two boys watched the men. With shifty, observant eyes they noted all the preparations.

After a while the boys began to irritate Pier. And since he thought they were a little too young to see the castrating, he began to give them odd jobs to discourage their curiosity. But, for young hired hands, they were too well paid. What was coming was going to be the biggest thing they had ever seen. So, when either Pier or Red Joe needed a few nails, they flew to the tool shed and back. When a board was needed they ran to get that.

But Pier kept at it. "Teo, skin up the side a that wall there an' bring me a couple a them old boards from the loft."

Teo shot up the wall like a monkey. "Which one, Pop? One a them dirty ones, or a clean one?"

"Better make it a dirty one."

Pier looked at Red Joe. He hoped he would take the hint and help him get rid of the boys.

"This one, Pop?"

Pier looked up. "Yip."

"Okay, Pop." In a flash Teo was down again.

Red Joe acted as if he noticed nothing wrong. He stood with his back to Pier, his short bowlegs spread wide, his crafty eyes on the clamorous mass of black pigs in the next pen. Red Joe spat to one side, and said, "Yell, you bastards, yell. In a couple a minutes, when we get through with you, you won't be feelin' so happy."

Jimmy watched his father carefully and then turned to view them too, and spat, and said, "Yeh, you bastards, yeh. When we get through with you, you'll be sorry."

And Teo growled, "Yeh, when we get through with docking you babies, you'll know it, you bastards."

"Aw, g'wan," Jimmy said to Teo, shoving him away, "what do you know about dockin' anyway?"

"I know plenty."

"Here, here," Pier said, grinning reluctantly. "Now, you kids shut up. An' get out a here. Go somewheres else to play. Get."

"Aw, Pa," began Teo.

"Get under the trees where it's cool. March!"

The boys eyed him with sour faces.

He made a sudden jump for them, and they ran, heels higher than heads. Shep, the golden-fleeced collie, who had been jumping and barking at the excitement, ran with them, nipping at their flowing pant legs.

"There," said Pier, sighing, "there, at least that's one worry off my mind."

Red Joe turned. He pulled up his overall, and slapped it. It was stiff with dirt and dried milk. "Lookin' at it won't hurt them kids none, Pier."

"I still don't like it."

Red Joe shrugged.

Pier looked up at the weather. "Ain't really the best kind a day fer it. Should be clear. Sunny."

Red Joe demurred. "Aw, well, this muggy stuff won't hurt none."

"Pigs'll heal better."

"Oh hell, let's take a chance. Columbus did. An' anyway, tomorry I can't help you."

Pier looked at the boiling mass of gray-black pigs. "Every time I do this I feel sorry fer them critters. It must be a helluva feelin' to lose yer knockers. Once they're gone, they're gone fer good."

Red Joe spat a stream of tobacco juice to one side. "Pigs don't know no better."

Pier went on. "You know, there's enough seeds there in them little nuggets to fill the whole world with pigs."

Red Joe said nothing. He laid out the knives on the workbench. He touched up one of them with a stone. *Sa-sla. Sa-sla.* He ran the

knife's edge lightly over a fingernail and nodded. "Well, let's get going."

"Just as you say," Pier said, nodding. He reached into the pen and lifted up a squealer by its hind leg. The pig held itself stiffly, its eyes bugging. Pier swung it up and threw it on its back in the V of the trough. Before the pig could scramble itself together, he grabbed a foreleg and a rear leg in each hand. He drew rear legs forward until the knots of seed bulged out of the sloppy scrotum. "Now."

Red Joe bent forward, his eyes sparkling with anticipation.

Just then there was a noise above them; a scramble; a pause. Then a thump behind them.

Pier turned, startled. And saw Teo lying on the floor of the pen next to them. The boy was on his back, his eyes wide, and his mouth open. He had hit the ground hard enough to be knocked out of breath. Above the boy was Jimmy, peering out of the dusky mow, hanging onto a rafter. Pier guessed instantly that Teo had slipped from one just like it, and had fallen.

A sharp pain nicked Pier's hand. He jumped, let the pig go. And saw that Red Joe's knife had sliced open his skin just below the thumb. The falling boy had startled Red Joe, jerking his knife hand just as he was about to snip the pig's seeds.

Pier swore. "Holy horse collar! Dammit to hell anyway. Cut my hand. God damn you kids." He sucked the wound. The blood was salty and warm on his tongue. "Damn you kids, didn't I tell you to get out of here? Now get. Or I'll kick yer behind up between yer ears." He made a violent gesture in Teo's direction.

Teo got slowly to his feet, coughing, trying to get his breath. Jimmy slid down to join him.

Red Joe said, "Jim! Get!"

Teo got his breath. "Aw, Pa, we don't know what to play."

"I don't care. Get the hell out of here."

"Aw . . ."

"Get too close here, an' we're liable to grab you"—and Pier reached out and grabbed Teo and threw him on his back in the operating trough—"an' take yers out by mistake instead."

Red Joe laughed and whipped the knife over Teo's body. "Shall we take it out, Pier, an' see what it looks like?"

Pier didn't like the tone in Red Joe's voice. "Wal, we will, if he don't get the hell out of here."

"Or shall I cut it off with this butcher knife?"

Pier said nothing.

Teo lay frozen-still, his little green-blue eyes crossed and digging into the sides of his nose.

"Now," Pier asked sternly, "kin we depend on you kids goin' somewheres else?"

"Sure, Pop."

The sound of a car came to Pier. Glancing toward the lane, he saw a green-blue Buick, a newer model than his own, turn onto the yard. He recognized Blacktail.

The moment he saw the man he felt uneasy, and he let the boy to his feet. It was like being caught at sacrificing a son, like an Abraham being caught with an Isaac on an altar. He stood up and held his wounded hand in his mouth, sucking it.

The boys bounded across the yard. They ran through the gate and clambered onto the running board of Blacktail's car.

In a moment Blacktail got out. He came across the yard, picking his way around dried-up cow piles, horse dungings, and pig curdles. The two boys tagged behind.

"Wonder what he wants," Pier muttered.

"It won't be good, whatever it is," Red Joe said in a low voice, putting aside the knife.

"Yeh. I see he's got himself a new car. Must a traded in the old Reo."

"Yeh."

Blacktail came up close.

"Hi," Pier said.

"Hello, Frixen. Busy?"

"Not very."

Blacktail smiled. His neat black mustache wriggled superiorly as he licked his lips. " 'Lo, Faber."

Red Joe nodded, stood stock-still. His weasel-swift eyes darted from one face to the other. Jimmy's eyes darted in a deadpan face too. Teo came around and stood beside Pier.

"What was you doing with the boy on the table?"

Pier coughed. He cursed inwardly. He turned on the boys. "Now, for the last time, get! march! scat!"

The two boys lingered, hoping to take advantage of the company, thinking that he wouldn't dare touch them before a stranger.

Pier jumped at them.

They flew away again, scattering some white chickens that had collected for the feast. They ran into the barn. Through the cracks of the cow-barn door, they watched the men.

Blacktail said, needlingly, "You two look like you're enjoying your work."

Red Joe grunted. "We're doin' it."

Blacktail sniffed. "Oyster hunting."

Red Joe smirked. "Yip. Gettin' oursel's some nice pig fries."

"You can have them," Blacktail said, shaking his head.

Pier said, "Wal, what kin I do y'u fer?"

Blacktail kicked lightly at a half-buried cob. "Oh, nothing really. I just happened to notice that some years back you fenced in some county land."

In a flash Pier recalled the grassland west of his pasture. He had grazed cattle on it for a while in the fall of 1918. "Yeh. What about it?"

"Nothing. Nothing. Except that trespassing on guv'ment property without permission is serious business."

Pier opened his eyes. He saw that Red Joe had stilled too. "Look, mister, if you kin find a posthole back there, I'll give you a dollar for every one you find."

"You didn't use it?"

"What do you think I am, a criminal?"

"Well, if you say so, I'll take your word for it."

"Besides, what's it of yer business anyway?"

Blacktail lifted the lapel of his summer jacket, revealing a deputy sheriff's badge.

Pier started. He ejaculated, "So Rexwinkel's made you his depity, has he? Holy horse collar."

Blacktail backed away a step. He seemed disappointed that neither Pier nor Red Joe had flinched.

Pier saw an instant connection. For the favor of giving his good-for-nothing son, Willie, a job, Sheriff Rexwinkel had put Blacktail on his force. The position paid a lot of money for very little work. And gave him power.

Red Joe moved and spat to one side. "Well, if that don't beat all. Now I've seen everything."

Pier glared at Blacktail. "Did you drive all the way up from Starum just to tell me that?"

"Oh no. No, I just happened to think about it when I drove into your lane."

"Wal, what did you come for then in the first place?"

Blacktail looked at Red Joe, indicating he wanted to talk to Pier privately.

"Speak up. I ain't got nothing to hide from my neighbors."

Blacktail narrowed his eyes. "Well, all right. It's your funeral." He took a sheaf of papers from his inside pocket and began flipping through them. "I have a number of complaints here about your father."

"What's he been up to now? Buckin' on that Drake Estate deal?"

Blacktail hardened even more. "No, these complaints have something to do with the law against seining in the Big Sioux. A penitentiary offense."

"Wal, talk to him."

"I have."

"Oh."

"Frixen, I understand you gave your father money to buy a seine. That you even share in his hauls."

"An' if I did?"

"Then you too can be sent up. As an accessory to the crime."

"Are you tryin' to make a Big Sioux outlaw out a me?"

Blacktail smiled. "Frixen, they have better names than that for people like you."

Pier, still holding his sore hand, and beginning to rebel at the frustration that had been dogging his steps all morning, at last had enough. "Blacktail, I ain't orderin' y'u off my yard. No, not yit. But if you know what's good for you, you'll get off by yerself. An' the next time you come on it, nosin' into my affairs, I'd advise you to make damn sure it ain't yer own dirty soul ye're trackin' down."

2. THE STRANGE SUMMER

. I .

SUMMER CAME.

June days were suddenly and strangely full of rains and torrents.

Thousands of seeds that Pier had sown with painstaking care were washed into the Big Sioux. The floods were ruthless.

The late corn stood stubborn and short in the soaked loess. Furiously cellulating weeds obliterated the rows.

The grain and the pasture grasses grew rapidly, though many of the solid green patches were inundated with tons of silt and leeched-out gravels and sands.

Insects thrived. For the first time in many years Pier noticed mosquitoes. They were a pest. And clouds of wind-dancing little

flies got into his face and hair when he walked across the yard.

And birds thrived. Because of the myriads of insects, the martins, swallows, robins, sparrows, the goldfinch, the brown thrasher, the rusty blackbirds, the mourning doves, the bobolink, meadow lark, the red-winged blackbird, the dickcissel, the orchard oriole, the cowbird, the flaming cardinal, all, for once, had enough to eat. Sometimes even the young hens and roosters took after the insects, running as if they were chasing phantoms.

Each morning Pier sniffed the sky for a sign of a hot wind. But the cold northeasters and northwesters held fast. He almost longed for desert winds from the southwest. He needed a dry spell now as badly as he had once needed rain.

And more and more rains fell in June.

Pier fretted.

One day he tried to cultivate. But the shovels wouldn't throw the wet soil. They clogged in the soggy earth. And the cultivator wheels slid uncontrollably over the greasy surface. And the weeds he tore up he only transplanted.

The skies became darker, the land more soggy with water. The cistern filled, soon overflowed with sweet rain water. Sprinkles and showers, running off the water-choked land, became noisy soil-tearing freshets. Heavy rains deluging the land became roaring cloudbursts.

The new ditch in the orchard south of the house deepened. The waters worked in the bed. They cut wider. They slashed deep. Twenty feet from the house they opened up the roots of an apple tree to the wind and the sun. The hog-tight fence between the garden and the barnyard hung like a swinging footbridge over the yawning hole.

The yellow loess in the bottom of the ditch, with its faint traces of black humus and bits of anciently decayed debris, became white-yellow as the slash deepened. Sometimes the frothing waters excavated cups of pebbles, red and yellow, spilled them down the stream.

The ditch widened. When it became too much of a gaping hole for a man to step over, Pier bridged it with a plank.

The curling, ravenous water bit into the hardened tracks of the lane. When it gouged out a crack deep enough to snap the axle of a car, Pier bought a steel culvert to fit it.

Once, a night, a wash of weeds and cornstalks plugged the cul-

vert. Again water flowed over the land, tore at it. By morning the roughneck stream had dragged the culvert into the orchard.

The slash widened; became a small gully. The hole opened, began to edge toward the cement foundation of the house.

. 2 .

It was on a late June morning, just after the ten o'clock lunch, that the clogged skies opened at last. Streams of sunlight suddenly poured through gaping holes. The muggy gray-purples scattered. Heaven-light limned the towering cloud tops.

Cheered by the change, Pier got the horses up from the pasture and stalled them. He curried their rain-sleek hair. He harnessed them.

To while away the time until dinner, when he could be sure the land would be dry enough to work, he decided to repair the hay slings. Some of the bolts in the cross sticks had to be replaced with new ones.

The door of the tool shed faced south. The sudden humid sun burned down on him as he worked. Sweat trickled into his armpits.

Teo played at his feet. The boy, imitating his father, was fixing a haymow too, and pretending that his hay slings were broken.

Golden-haired Shep lay near, crouched, waving his tail, sometimes slashing at flies, sometimes covering his lean black nose with his paws.

Happy at last, Pier whistled and hummed to himself. He smelled the sweat on his lip.

White leghorn chickens dotted the yard. Sometimes an adventurous young hen came up close to look at him, first with one eye cocked to one side, then the other; sometimes blinking both lids; sometimes daringly pecking at the weed seeds caught in the cloth laces of his shoes.

He hummed:

> *"Now Jesse James had a heart for the poor.*
> *He'd help a debtor from the floor.*
> *He'd rob a bank*
> *And kill a crank*
> *To keep a widow simon-pure."*

Teo looked up and asked, his blue-green eyes wide, "Say, Pop, who was Jesse James?"

"Jesse James? Why, Jesse was a poor man's friend."

"Like how?" The boy's milk-white hair gleamed silver in the sun.

"Oh, he robbed the rich folks' banks an' gave to them that had nothin'."

"Did he ever do anything fer you, Pop?"

"Nope, not me. But I know some that he did."

"Like who?"

"Wal, there was a widder livin' t'Philosophy, South Dakota. She got help from him."

"That where we got our other home?"

"That's it."

"Did he give her money?"

"Yip. Helped her pay the rent."

"Where'd Jesse get the money?"

"Wal, I tell you, Sonny. It's a long story." Pier squinted at a hole he had just bored with a brace and bit. He picked up a bolt and tried it into the hole. It was tight. He took up a hammer and punched it through. "It was this way, Sonny. This here widder, you see, she was behind in her rent. Didn't know where she was gonna get the money to catch up on her back rent an' pay the new rent comin' up. Wal, she——"

"A widder like the Widder Kaia?"

"Yeh. Yeh, that's it."

"Uh-huh." Teo looked up at Pier. "Pop, what's rent?"

"Rent? Wal, rent's . . . rent's where one man owns . . . wal, it's like this. Supposin' Blacktail owned our home here. Wal, I'd have to pay him somethin' fer usin' it, wouldn't I?"

Teo dropped his eyes to the ground, fumbled with his toymaking. Pier saw him scrape his worn shoe on the drying gray-black soil, saw him wriggle his toes inside his shoes. "But, Pop, how kin Blacktail make you pay rent if this is our farm?"

"Wal, let's suppose then that the Big Sioux's come up so high it's covered our land. The whole farm, house, barn, this tool shed here, the horses an' cows an' pigs——"

"An' drown 'em all dead?"

"Yeh, that's it. Wal, we ain't got no place to live then, has we? No. Course not. So, we gotta go somewheres else. Now, just suppose we move on some land what Blacktail owns. Wal, he ain't gonna let us live on his land fer nothin', is he? Hell no. He's gonna

charge us a little. Wal, that chargin' is rent. Plain ordinary rent."

"Say, Pop, who give you this land?"

"My pa. You know, Grandpap."

'Uh-huh. An' who give it t'him?"

"Wal, he just found it here."

'You mean, nobody had it once?"

"Nope. Nobody. There was nobody here. Just Indians an' grass an' Jesse James."

"Nobody?"

"Nobody."

'Not even some people?"

"Nope. Not nobody."

"Uh-huh."

Pier fitted a nut over the bolt. He whistled a little, forgot about the story.

"Well, what happened to the widder, Pop?"

"Oh. Oh yeh. Wal, the land the widder was livin' on, some big fat Blacktail owned it, see, an' was chargin' her heavy rent. An' she had no money. The Indians had kilt her little son. Her husband was a no-good drunk. He spent all her hard-earned savin's, made a mess a things. Wal, the big fat Blacktail landlord got to worryin' he wasn't gonna get his rent no more, so he told the widder that if she didn't have the money the next time he come fer it, why, she would suffer a fate worse than death."

"What's that?"

"Oh, that's . . . wal, it's kind a hard to tell you, boy. It's when . . . wal, if she'd a suffered it, she wouldn' a been simon-pure no more."

"Uh-huh." Teo began to work on his toy hay slings again.

"Wal, just before the fat landlord came, Jesse James happened to be ridin' by. He'd just been up north somewheres, robbin' the rich, an' generally makin' a nuisance a hissel'. Now Jesse, he was always careful a where an' how he went, see, 'cause the viligantes was always lookin' fer him. Viligantes is sheriffs and deputies lookin' fer trouble-makers. Wal, Jesse, he comes along an' sees her house, sees how it stands on the outskirts a town, down behind some willers, an' out a sight. So, he hides his horse in the willers an' sneaks up to her house in the evenin' dark. He knocks an' says, 'Hello, ma'am. I'm hungry. You reckon you got a meal fer a travelin' son?' An' she looks him

over an' thinks, 'My stars alive! He looks just like my husband used to did before he went bad.' An'——"

"Did the widder really look like the Widder Kaia?"

"Sure. Just like her. Wal, an' so she says, 'Sure, come in. Sure I got a meal fer a travelin' hungry son.' An' she hurries an' rustles him up a meal, some potatoes an' meat an' gravy an' nice white bread."

"An' nice red, wild-grape jelly too, huh, Pop?"

"Sure. An' pretty soon, after he's all full an' fed, he sits back an' pulls out a cigar an' smokes an' takes it easy. Wal, boy, that's when she broke down an' cried. That's just what her big strappin' husband used to do before he went bad. Smoke a cigar. An' Jesse says, 'Kind lady, is there something wrong?' An' she says, 'No.' An' he says, 'Kind lady, them tears a yern, they don't look nice on a purty face. Tell me, did somebody rob you?' 'No,' she cries, 'but I'm afraid somebody will.' Jesse, he jumped up then. 'What?' 'Yes, somebody will.' 'What dirty devil would do a thing like that to a widder woman? Tell me, an' I'll kill the bastard.' Wal, she tells him."

"Say, Pop, if she's so poor, where'd she get all that grub she give him?"

"I dunno. Probably had a garden somewheres."

"Uh-huh."

"Wal, anyways, Jesse, he smiles to hissel' an' asks, 'How much is the rent?' She does some quick figurin' an' says, 'A hundred bucks.' He pulls out a roll a bills as big as yer fist, bills he took from a bank somewheres, an' hands her the hundred bucks. She cries, an' cries, an' kisses his hand, an' takes the hundred bucks. An' thanks him sound. Jesse, he pats her on the back an' goes outdoors an' gets to work on a plan he's made up in his mind. It's real dark by now, darker'n black cats painted with stove soot, an' he waits along the street. Pretty soon the ol' landlord comes sneakin' along like a fat tomcat lookin' fer somethin'. Jesse James, he watches him. Watches the fat tomcat go into the widder's house. The landlord goes inside, lickin' his chops. Then, pretty soon, the door opens an' out steps the tomcat landlord agin. An' he's got a little disappointment in his face, though he's a little satisfied too, because he got his money. An' then Jesse James, he jumps out a the dark an' grabs the tomcat landlord by the neck an' throws him down"—to illustrate, Pier leaped on Teo, grabbed his throat, threw him down—"an' chokes him, robs him, an' kicks him in the slats. Then, smilin', Jesse James hops on his horse

an' gallops away. That's how Jesse James kept a widder simon-pure."

Teo lay stiff in Pier's hands. The surprise attack had scared him into crossing his eyes.

Shep, meantime, jumped up and began to bark, running in circles around them.

Pier released the boy and got to his knees.

Teo blinked, coughed, rubbed his throat. "Is that really true, Pop?"

"It sure is. It ain't nothin' but the honest-to-God straight true fact. As sure as I am standin' here."

"Uh-huh."

"Yip. Fact is, the widder survived the hard times an' is alive today."

"Uh-huh."

Pier stood up. He was about to step back into the tool-shed door when he happened to see something. His eyes widened. "Sonny, where'd you get that?" He pointed to a crude but accurate toy replica of a hay sling.

"I made it."

"Huh."

Teo got up too. He eyed his father carefully. "I didn't use anything you needed, did I, Pop?"

"No. What're y'u gonna do with that?"

"Why, I'm gonna put hay in my hay barn with it."

"Hay barn?"

"Sure. Look." Teo pointed at a small structure beneath a maple at the edge of the grove. Alde Romke had once used it to smoke ham and beef.

Pier walked over to the smokehouse. He studied it. The boy had cut a miniature haymow door into it. The door was so real Pier involuntarily glanced up to compare it with the door in the big barn. The lad had even fixed a small carrier rail under the smokehouse roof, with a twine string for a lift rope. "Wal I'll be a monkey's uncle!"

Pier's eyes narrowed reflectively. An idea hit him. He scuffed at the drying earth. He sniffed the clear, clean air. He walked around until he had the idea straight in his mind. He nodded. Yes, it was a shame to waste all this mechanical talent on toys. Yes, a man was a fool if he didn't put some of it to use on the farm. "Sonny, how would you like to work in the field with me someday?"

Teo's blue-green eyes widened. "Why, I'd like that okay, Pop."

"Would you like to run a cultivator?"

"I sure would. I'd start right this minit if you said so."

"Wal, Sonny, maybe you'll start sooner than you think. You see, them weeds has got such a head start on me I'm afraid I'll never catch up unless I get me a hired hand. An' Judas t'Priest, Sonny, I don't see why you wouldn't make me just about the best hired hand a man could hire. Yessir. That's just what we're gonna do."

"An' I kin have a cup a wake-up coffee with you in the mornin'?"

"Oh, you bet, Sonny."

Then the idea opened in Teo too. He stepped back. His round blue-green eyes deepened. He pushed back his flappy straw hat. His white hair gleamed in the sun. He put on a manly air. He took a deep breath. "You mean you're actually gonna buy me a new cultivator, Pop? A man's cultivator?"

"Yip. That's just what I'm gonna do."

"Y'u ain't givin' me fish?"

"Oh no. An' we'll go buy 'er before dinner because by one o'clock" —he kicked at the drying soil—"it'll be dry enough to work."

The little fellow stood swelling. Then, suddenly, whirling around, he leaped across the yard, his small hard buttocks wiggling in his tight pants. Over his shoulder he shouted at Pier, "I'll get the trotters up from the pasture, Pop. You get the pocketbook."

Shep raced after the boy, his golden-brown hair streaming.

Pier choked. His eyes ran quick tears. By God, he thought, the Lord God never made a better boy. If only Nertha could have borned a couple a half-dozen more.

· 3 ·

Nertha objected; almost hysterically. "But, Pier, Teo is only a boy. Why, he's only a baby!"

"Boy? Baby? He's more man than most men are. Why, woman, you should a seen what I seen this mornin' on the yard. Why, that kid's so smart, it's a miracle. He's as smart as a whip. Got a real brain fer machines."

"Oh, Pier. But he's such a boy." Nertha tried to put her arms around Teo, but the lad escaped her and came to Pier's side. "Oh, Teo, ain't you afraid of a runaway?"

Teo stiffened. "With them old plugs?"

"But, Teo——"

"Besides, I'll put a double knot in the lines like Pa does an' hold 'em."

"But ain't you afraid of that awful machine?"

"Naw."

"But how will you know how to run it, Teo, when you've never run one?"

"Why, I'll just look at it an' do it."

"Pier! Do you want to kill our lad boy?"

"Course not. Don't be bughouse, woman. It's just that I hate to see all them farmin' idees goin' to waste. Why, that kid's goddamned smart. Smarter'n all get out."

"Don't swear, Pier."

"Wal, hell, it's the truth."

"I suppose the next thing you'll do is buy him a long pants?"

"If he wants one, sure."

"Oh, Pier. Why hurry the boy into man's clothes? Time goes fast enough. Let him hang onto the passing of his young days as long as he can."

"Oh, horse collar."

"I know I wished I had as a little girl. If I had known what was comin' . . ." Her voice trailed off and she looked down in her lap. A great sigh escaped her.

"What?"

"Pier, let my little boy alone." Once more she looked up at him, pleading, piteous. "Pier, I want him to stay my little boy for a little while longer yit. Please. He's my firstling."

"You mean, ours."

"Well . . . ours, then. But let him be my little boy a little while longer yit."

Sudden anger fired up in Pier. "Woman, why don't you get busy an' get me some more boys? An' let this one grow up the way he wants to."

Nertha let out a great breath, gave up. She looked down in her lap. Her hands tumbled together. She bowed as if someone had laid a stone on her heart.

Blindly Pier struck the table with his balled fist. The creamer and sugar hopped. He could not let this woman ruin this boy of his,

even if Teo had been the first to open her womb. "C'mon, Sonny, we're goin' to town. C'mon."

· 4 ·

Pier got the new green single-row cultivator with the yellow-painted wheels and the gleaming silver shovels.

He harnessed the plodding blacks, Colonel and Topsy, and hitched them up before the machine. Then he set the narrow-hipped little fellow on the seat. "All right, Sonny, drive them horses around the yard a couple a times."

Without a tremble, Teo took the lines in his hands and, sawing them back and forth, drove to the barn and back, drove to the granary and back. The blacks behaved as if they knew they had to be patient with the antics of their new driver.

Once Pier stopped the boy to adjust the seat, lowering it to the very last notch. The wrenches clinked dully on the painted heads and nuts of the bolts.

On the third trip across the yard, Teo went beyond Pier's instructions, dropping the shovels into the hardened yard soil. The gray-black earth shot into the air. Teo shouted in glee. Shep, who had been following them with interest, backed away and barked ecstatically.

"Hey there!" Pier roared, at the same time managing to keep a straight face. "You needn't show off." To himself he thought: "The rascal, the danged little snotnose."

Pier hitched up Maid and Mell to his old single-row and, leading the way, drove through the grove north toward the little fifty. "Okay, now we'll try you out on the field, my boy."

He made Teo wait a round while he took the first row up and the third row back.

"See how it looks, Teo? Now, when your work don't look like that, holler. I'll stop like a shot an' be right there to help you. Hear? Good. So. All right. I'll go ahead a little ways here"—and he drove his team on a few rods, then walked back—"so I kin actually watch how you do. All right. Drive."

The boy clucked up the horses. He drove into the field, straddling the horses over the second row, and giving each horse one of the furrows Pier had plowed the round previous. The horses drew

steadily. Teo gripped the plow handles firmly, steered them accurately. They came up to Pier's plow. "Whoa," said the boy. The blacks stopped instantly.

Pier looked at the work, sniffed, forced back a smile, and said, "All right. Now we'll make a full round. An' remember, holler when you're in trouble."

"Okay, Pop."

Solemnly, calmly, the blacks pulled up behind Pier, just within reach.

When they finished the round, Pier stepped off his machine to look at the boy's work. "Ain't bad at all," he said, once more withholding a grin. To himself he thought: "Of course, the boy could have pulled his shovels a little closer together, could have gone a little deeper. But, still and all . . ."

Pier asked, "Wal, mister, how'd you like it?"

" 'Swunnerful, Pop. I kin do it just as easy."

"Tired?"

"Nope."

"Is that the truth?"

"Yip. Well, my arms is a little tired all right."

"Uh-huh. Look, Sonny, if you was to tie up your lines like so"—and Pier swung the line ends in a quick circle and drew them up into a slipknot—"like so and then put it over your shoulder like this, your hands'd be free, see?"

"Okay, Pop."

"Now if this ain't the right length, just holler."

"Sure, Pop."

Pier saw Shep sitting near by. "I think we better send that houn' back to the yard. He'll take your 'tention off yer work. Shep, go home. G'wan. Get. Go. Git, I said."

The dog ran a way, sat down.

"Git!"

Shep ran on, the golden color of his hair gradually fading into the blue shadows of the maple grove.

"Wal, now"—Pier stalked around the cultivator, sniffing, smelling for things that might happen, things he should warn the little fellow about—"wal, ye're doin' a pretty good job, boy. H'm. Wal. One more thing. Pull yer shovels into the corn hill closer. An' dig a little deeper."

"Or else you might as well drag a hen backwards through the field, huh, Pop?"

Pier started. Now where in the name of the Âlde Han had the kid got that bright idee? Pier said, letting out his breath, "That's right, Sonny. You couldn' a said it better." Pier cleared his nose. And, kicking at the still soggy soil, he returned to his plow and clambered aboard. "All right, here's how. Giddap."

"Giddap."

This time, however, Pier began to have misgivings the moment the blacks started up behind him. If the little bud should fall between the shovels, or fall beneath the wheels, he would never . . .

Sighing, Pier wiggled in his hard steel seat.

On the third time around, he heard the boy muttering a little. Pier twisted in his seat and looked back. But the black dirt seemed to be bubbling up smoothly from the boy's shovels and the corn row seemed to be emerging unscathed behind.

Pier nodded to himself. The little fellow was already growling at the land like a man.

On the fourth round, on the way back, Teo yipped loudly.

Pier instantly stopped his grays and the blacks behind. He leaped off his steel seat. "What's louse, bud?"

"Oh, these gaddanged shovels is goin' too deep, Pop. I can't hold 'em up. See?" Teo pointed to the corn behind. A half-dozen hills had been covered.

With a careful shove of foot, Pier uncovered the corn. He studied the crossbeams of the machine. He made a few adjustments. "Wal, let's try that."

They did. But in a few minutes Teo's agonized cry came up again.

Once more Pier uncovered the hills of corn and adjusted the plow. Still the shovels dug too deep.

Teo began to cry. "Them gaddanged shovels. They either plow clouds or China."

Pier chuckled. "Here, here. Cut out the swearin'."

"Well, I'm mad, Pop. I'm mad. Them gaddanged shovels."

"Say," Pier said, gripping the boy's shoulders roughly. "I said cut it out."

Teo whirled in Pier's hands and looked up at him with wide eyes. "I meant that."

"Okay, Pop. But the shovels still ain't workin' right."

Pier studied him. "Boy, what did you tell Mom just the while ago?"

"I . . . I dunno. Forgot, I guess."

"The hell you say."

"Now you're swearin', Pop."

Pier coughed. "Wal, right you are. But what did you tell Mom?"

"I just said, 'I'll just look at it an' do it.' "

"Right. Now. Look at this. What's makin' them shovels dig too deep?"

Teo looked. "I don't know."

"Wal, son, let's be real smart an' figger it out. Let's . . . I tell you what. Let's let me take yer machine for a while an' you take mine. I'll break it in."

Teo's face clouded.

"Wal, son, it's that, or quit."

"Okay, Pop."

Pier changed the horses. He adjusted the old machine to Teo's short, skinny legs, the new plow to his own.

They went on plowing.

Pier found that the boy had been right. The new plow worked too easily. A mere touch of the foot on the beam sent the shovels burrowing into the earth like a pair of badgers. The plow was alive.

An hour later, while they were resting the horses, Teo said suddenly, "Say, Pop, I think I'm gonna let you keep Yellow Jack."

"Who?"

"Yellow Jack. The new plow."

"Oh. Why?"

"Well . . . this one works like a humdinger for me."

Pier chuckled, pleased. The bud was bound and determined to stay in the field. Wal.

And the name Yellow Jack. Why, the kid was giving names to machines like a man gave names to cows. Imagine! A name to a machine. A dead thing. That's a kid for you.

· 5 ·

July was also cool. The few burning days of the dry spell were more than matched by days of cold squalls and chilling hail and drizzling rain.

As the dreary weeks went by, with rains interrupting his work,

Pier began to sense that even with Teo's help he wasn't going to get his oats harvested and threshed ahead of the mold and the rust that was bound to set in, or before the grasshoppers, now hatching in the wet draws, came by the billions.

He muttered in the house. He grumbled on the yard. He smoked heavily. His cheeks became leaner. A few more gray hairs appeared on his temples. His restless eyes deepened in their sockets. When he walked over the barnyard, he kicked at empty pails, and sticks, and lumps of mud lying in his way. Once he almost kicked Teo.

At last, at the end of the month, a few dry days came along. It was only by working all day under the sun and all night under the moon, by leaving all the chores to Teo, that Pier managed to get his grain cut and shocked.

Teo was a great help. The boy had by now learned to do all the chores except milking the fresh heifers. They were usually a bit too frisky for his young hands. And the boy brought lunch out to the field, fetched balls of twine, brought water, hitched up the horses while Pier greased the old binder, and ran errands for Nertha.

The first week of August came and the hot days vanished entirely. For ten days there weren't any clear skies at all.

With surprise in his eyes, Pier looked at the deranged heavens. With growing ache he watched his shocks of grain graying in the fields. With rising fear he saw the corn mature and tassel too slowly, saw that unless he had a very late frost it too was doomed for the year. The bumper crop was slipping from his grasp.

Pier snapped into action. He drove over to Red Joe's. A plan had popped into his head and he was going to see what Red Joe thought about it.

The two men stood leaning over the weather-grayed feed bunks near Red Joe's barn. Lazy red-and-white cows lay in the yard, chewing their cuds.

Pier, kicking at a clod, said, "Red Joe, ain't this been terrible weather? It's enough to drive a man into his early grave."

"Well, it sure ain't weather to celebrate about."

"This country is goin' to the dogs. When it ain't droughtin', it's floodin'. A helluva country."

Red Joe looked slyly to one side. "Well, it ain't exactly heaven yit."

Again Pier kicked impatiently at a clod. "Red Joe, everybody in the threshin' ring is losin' their oats, ain't they?"

"Wal, they ain't gainin' any."

"Uh-huh. That's what I thought. Wal, I got me an idee."

"Spill it."

"I'm thinkin' a stackin' our grain."

"Why?"

"Wal, look. I got a hunch that except for a week or so this dry spell is gonna go on all summer long. If it does, we're licked if we shock thresh."

"How d'you figger that?"

"Look. The dry week comes. How many farmers kin we thresh in that time? Three. Maybe four. Only you an' me, we're liable not to be one of them three or four. So that leaves us with soaked shocks."

"I ain't never thought a that," Red Joe said slowly. He chewed his quid thoughtfully, moved it from one cheek to the other.

"Sure. Now if we stack, one day at your place, the next at mine, we'll at least save ourselves a little."

"H'm."

"Besides, I ain't never been too het on shock threshin' anyway. Oats should sweat in stacks."

Red Joe cleaned his teeth with a breath. He took his foot off the feed-bunk railing and replaced it with the other. "Maybe it should."

"Wal, what do you think a my idee?"

"I dunno. Supposin' I go in with you, who's gonna stack?"

"Why, hell, me. I know how. Besides, I seen how they did it t'Squaw Tit. It's a trick, see. You keep the butts out an' down, the heads in an' up. That way the stack's like a shingled roof. Keeps sheddin' water."

Red Joe's brow was still wrinkled. "What about the boys?"

"Are they worryin' about us?"

"An' Ol' Spit?"

"I'll just tell him I'm droppin' out. An' if he don't like it, he don't get the job a stack-threshin' me."

"Well, all right. The first time it's dry enough, we'll try her."

"Kin I depend on it?"

"Yip."

"Good. Because I know I'm right. I feel it in my bones."

A few days later the sun did clear the clouds from the skies. The soaked land sweat. Fogs lay in the swales. Dews wetted all growths.

Pier rushed into the big fifty east of the house the first thing in the morning, tipping over the shocks so that the sun could get at all sides of the moldy, gray-edged bundles.

Teo, tired but manful, helped him. As he worked, Pier glanced at the boy now and then, wondering if he wasn't making the mistake of getting the boy into the field too early in life. The boy could be soured with too much of it.

Even Âlde Romke came out one day. But the humid, sweaty air was too much for the old man and soon he had to be carried out of the field, puffing and out of breath, clutching at his heart.

At last the bundles were dry enough to work. Pier and Red Joe hustled into the fields. They left the yard chores for the women and the youngsters to do. They got up at four o'clock in the morning and by six usually had two loads on.

Pier chose a plot of land for the stacks between the barn and the north grove. At threshing time the new straw pile would rise where the old one had been.

Red Joe pitched off and Pier stacked. As soon as a load was off, the men sent Teo and Jimmy to the field with the empty rack. Usually, by the time Red Joe had pitched off the second load, the two youngsters had the bottom of the first rack more than level full. Both men made a point of complimenting the boys profusely, and then set each to driving the horses down the windrow while they finished the loading of the two racks.

Pier worked carefully. He could feel Red Joe's shrewd eyes watching his work. Starting from a mound set up in the middle, and circling it with round after round of bundles, butts down and out, heads in and up, he built up a base.

When he reached what he thought was the proper width, he asked, "Wal, Red Joe, what d'y'u think, this wide enough?"

"I dunno. Ye're the stacker."

"Course I'm gonna be settin' out the bundles when I get higher, around four to five feet, to put a butt on her like an egg's got when it's set on its fat end. Shed water better."

Red Joe said nothing.

Pier slapped his fork at the edges. He looked around, worrying

a bundle here and there. "I think this is it, though," he muttered. "Okay, let her rip. Some more bundles."

Red Joe tossed steadily, flipping the bundles directly in front of Pier, making them land in such a manner that Pier had merely to catch the butt and touch it into place. Pier patted each bundle with the flat of his fork.

He kept the middle higher than the sides. He mounted into the air. "You see, Red Joe, you gotta keep the center high to make sure that when the oats dries an' shrinks, the middle don't fall in like some a them cakes the ol' lady makes."

"Uh-huh," Red Joe grunted.

Pier stopped to wipe his brow. He stood carefully on the bundles. He could feel the smooth, worn leather soles of his shoes sliding on the glossy straw. "By jiggers, I think I could stand me a drink. How about you?"

"That goes here." Red Joe bent forward, leaning on his fork. His narrow buttocks stuck out like the rump of a small heifer. His bowlegs opened a hole in the sky.

Pier looked down the five-foot side and bounced a little on the bundles. "Wonder if I kin slide down here."

"Hey, cut it out!" Red Joe exclaimed. "I'll get it. You stay put." Red Joe hopped from his half-filled rack and bowlegged to the north shadow of the barn, where, under a few bundles, they had buried a crock of water. It was wrapped in a burlap sack and was bound with a piece of twine. Soaked in water, the rustic insulation kept the drink cool.

Red Joe stepped up and, thrusting a fork tine through the handle of the jug, reached it up to Pier.

Balancing unsteadily, Pier grabbed it. He pulled out the cob cork and, swinging it over his arm, lifted his elbow and drank. Water gurgled into his opened mouth. Balls of air jumped past his loose lips, rumbling up into the water. Pier drank long. Then, sighing, he swung the jug down, corked it, and put it back on the fork tine.

Red Joe took it down carefully. Gripping it, he too uncorked it, and chewed on his quid rapidly a few times, spat, thrust the quid out, cleaned his mouth with his tongue, spat again, blew through his mouth cavern a few times, took a swallow of water, rinsed his mouth, blew noisily, and at last took a long drink. "Aaaaaech! That's sure a treat fer a thirsty whistle. Good fer what ails y'u."

"Man, you took the words right out a my mouth."

Then, sighing, both went back to work.

They stacked steadily until the village bells began to ring:

A nooning sleep
Your health will keep.

For a week the skies stayed clear. The two men drove themselves hard.

Both had just half the grain up, six stacks each, when the first of a series of line storms came and slammed at the land.

A month later, after Ol' Spit Triggs had threshed them out, Red Joe came up and shook Pier's hand. "Edna an' I want to thank you, neighbor, fer what you done. What little we had, we saved."

"Aw, it was nothin'. Besides, the measly oats ain't much good."

"Just the same, it's feed."

"Just a binful a damned gray stuff," Pier muttered.

"Sure it's gray. But it's more than what most neighbors got."

"But we still didn't make any money this year."

"God damn it to hell, Pier, what do you want, a livin'?"

Pier grumbled to himself, scowling at the earth.

. 6 .

An unusually and a persistently cool September followed.

At night Pier went to bed shivering, hardly able to sleep, worrying that an early frost might come stealing in from the Big Sioux and nip his corn. Awakening in the morning, he was afraid to look out of the window.

On the morning of the ninth, he rushed into the kitchen half dressed. Slipping on his old red boots as he went, and a lined jacket and cap, he hurried into the yard, knelt down to feel the earth. It was still soft.

He stepped behind the grove and went a ways into the cornfield. There too he found no evidence of frost. The tall, green stalks stood calmly, rustling a little, stirring, whispering among themselves.

Coming out of the field, he happened to glance toward the pasture. There, down in the lowland, a faint white-gray lay on the grass. Shivering, drawing up his shoulders against the morning cold, he

went swiftly down the pasture lane. The sun was just rising. Its rays slanted underneath the blades of grass, illuminating beads of dew with a halo light.

He entered the white-gray area. Instantly his boots became sopping wet. Some of it was a frost, the rest a heavy dew. He looked at it for a while, leaning over a knee. He ran his hand through the grass. A crinkling of hoarfrost on a blade caught under his fingernail. Shrugging, defiant, he stood up, rounded up the black-and-white Frisian cows for the morning milking.

For two weeks he prowled around the yard, owlishly eying the cornfield.

But at last, on the evening of the twenty-seventh, he sensed it coming. It was the same feeling he had had just before he fell from the barn six summers ago. The ground beneath was on the move.

He was right. The next morning the grass and the corn and the leaves of the trees were as stiff as waxed paper. Since over half of the corn was still in the milky, doughy stage of growth, the frost had damaged the bulk of the crop.

Pier kicked at the earth.

3. THE GREAT MOUTH YAWNS

. I .

HE WAS IN FOR IT. WITH THE CORN CROP GONE, THE debt he owed on the Philosophy, South Dakota, farm had to be carried for another year.

Pier became cynical. He began to see things he had not noticed before.

The change in Nertha surprised him most. The once serene virgin, the once inwardly throbbing woman, had become like the soured corn in the field, shriveled up, wrinkled. She seemed suddenly fifteen years older.

And her attitude toward Teo began to disturb him. Always overly fond of the lad, she now seemed bent on making a baby out of him.

If Pier had not stepped in and got the boy to help him on the yard, she would have smothered him under her skirts. Luckily the boy was interested in Pier's talk and work.

The boy came to resent her touch, drew away from her when she reached out to stroke his hair or his shoulder, pushed her away when she helpfully reached out to straighten a twisted suspender.

Sometimes the boy was cruel to her. Then Pier, his conscience pricking him, would step in and tell the boy, "Now, Sonny, she's yer ma. She's entitled to a little respect."

Teo would look at him as if he were a buddy betrayed.

"Yeh, boy. I know. But it's the truth."

Teo would mumble a reply and slip outdoors and go to the tool shed.

Watching Nertha, Pier often caught her looking at the boy with a hot gleam in her eyes. It was the same kind of look Kaia had given him at the picnic when she had related her dream of the panting pursuer. Pier rolled his shoulders uneasily. He was afraid to follow through on the idea. Mothers weren't supposed to look at sons like that.

In Pier's and Nertha's physical relations things had changed too. She didn't respond to his touch any more. She lay cold in his bed. She did not kiss him except when he kissed her first, and then only when he demanded it. Taking her in his arms and loving her and entering her was like fondling a bag of grain. She was flat to him.

It angered him sometimes. So he shook her. He pinched her arms in his powerful lean fists. He bumped her and wrestled her. He bit her lightly on the shoulder.

At last, firing a little, she would raise an arm in protest. And then, of course, he fired too, and the first thing he knew, he would forget himself and possess her.

And afterward, after he had fallen on the sheet beside her, he would lie awake, thinking, thinking. What a sorry business it was. He had stooped again to wash himself in the rough gravel of her resentment.

Occasionally Pier looked inward and found that he had changed too. Every now and then he found mean impulses in his heart, impulses he usually associated with Blacktail.

One Saturday in October, an Indian summer day, Red Joe and Jimmy came over to help Pier haul manure.

Just as Red Joe drove on the yard with his manure spreader Nertha came out on the front porch and asked, "Could Teo drive me to town today?"

"No. I need him myself."

She brushed back her silver hair. "Oh." She stared at the oncoming machine. "You ain't lettin' him drive the manure spreader, are you?"

"Sure."

"Suppose something went wrong? With that stuff in it?"

"Wal, suppose something went wrong when he drives you? Same thing, ain't it?"

Stumped, she looked to one side. She sighed. She brushed her thigh. Then, as she turned to go inside again, she looked at the silent boy with such burningly possessive eyes that Pier started.

Red Joe, who had by this time stopped near the tool shed, called out, "Anybody home?"

Pier tried to be friendly, but the effort twisted his mouth. "Wal, if ye're lookin' fer us, there is."

Red Joe expectorated over the front wheel of the dung-crusted spreader, and grinned.

Jimmy and Teo eyed each other, and, whispering, suddenly ran toward the tool shed.

"Hey," Pier shouted, "don't go far. We'll need you pretty soon."

Red Joe chewed reflectively, watching the boys gallop away. "Pier, sometimes I think that kid of yers is too young to be drivin' horses. Specially three horses."

"Horse collar. He drove our racks this summer."

"I know. But he's pretty young."

"Wal, what about yer kid?"

"He's a couple years older."

"Age ain't got nothin' to do with it. It's brains that count." Pier put his foot up on the front wheel of the spreader, filling and lighting his pipe. "Red Joe, you should a seen him cultivatin'. I tell you, it was a miracle." Pier rambled on, bragging good-naturedly.

After a few moments, Red Joe's small round face wrinkled with displeasure. An envious look pinched his eyes.

"Really, Red Joe."

Red Joe spat. "Wal, let's get on with the haulin'."

Pier swallowed and held his tongue. He called Teo and together they hitched up the blacks and one of the grays, Maid, before Pier's spreader.

Pier and Red Joe loaded, and the boys took turns hauling the manure to the field.

There was an uneasy silence as they worked.

To make it worse, Teo was full of talk. He rattled on about hauling "horse 'nure, cow 'nure, chicken 'nure." He wondered if "pheasant 'nure was any good for the fields."

Teo was still jabbering away after two loads had been hauled out and so Pier said at last, "Judas Priest, Sonny, shut up. Must I cork you?"

Hurt, Teo picked up a fork and stabbed angrily at the green-black pile.

"Wal, I meant it, Sonny. Talk is for older people. Ain't it so, Red Joe?"

"Yeh," Red Joe grunted. He lifted a huge, sliding pile of straw-matted purple dung onto the rear of the spreader. It landed with a whishing thud.

The non-committal response irked Pier. He jerked at his straw hat, turning it a little to pull up his red hair inside. His lips thinned.

The three finished the load without another word.

Just as before, Teo crawled onto the spring seat, took up the lines and drove out to the fields, Shep following.

Jimmy returned then, and they loaded his spreader.

But when Teo came back, the tension increased. The boy, quickly forgetting, still full of words, babbled, "Pop, you should a seen what I saw. The prettiest bird. It was yellow. I think it was a canary. Or a finch. An' it sang. Sang sittin' on a tall weed up there on the hill. Sang like this. 'Tweet, tweet, I'm a honeysuckle singin' sweet.'" Teo picked up his fork, and began to throw on little forkfuls. "An' then it hopped to another weed an' sang, 'Tweet, tweet, I'm a sunflower——'"

"Yeh, yeh," Red Joe interrupted, "yeh, we know. You heard a flatfoot singin'."

Teo stopped. His green-blue eyes opened roundly. He pulled a suspender back over his shoulder. "A flatfoot? I ain't never heard of a flatfoot before."

Red Joe's face became sly. "You ain't, huh. Well, maybe there's a lot a things you ain't heard yit."

"A flatfoot, huh. What color is it?"

"Sort a green, with black wings."

Pier cocked an ear. He suddenly remembered a backhouse story Red Joe had told him, months before.

Teo turned to Pier. "Is that the truth, Pop? I've looked at birds all my life an' I ain't never seen one."

"Ask Red Joe. He knows." Pier was surprised at himself. Red Joe was about to play a practical joke on Teo and yet he felt very little impulse to forewarn the boy.

Teo's eyes flicked at Red Joe. "How big is it?"

"Oh, it'll just about fit into your hand if you close it half closed."

"So big?"

"No, a little bigger."

Pier thought to himself: "Should really stop this. It's going to be a dirty trick."

"So big?"

Red Joe grinned. "That's right."

Teo looked at Red Joe, then at the manure pile, then at the sky, then at Pier. "You know, Pop, I think Red Joe's feedin' me fish."

Red Joe laughed.

Teo shook his head. "It's sure funny I ain't never seen one a them flatfoots before." He stabbed his fork into the pile, began to pitch again.

Red Joe baited some more. "Funny thing is, mister, this is the time a year when they usually come around."

Again Teo paused. He wiped his hands on his little patched overall. "Don't they never come around no other time?"

"Nope. This is their time. You see, them flatfoots is a kind of a cowbird. But they don't care fer the cows until it's fall, not until the cows start eatin' the fresh fall grass."

"Oh."

"Yeh, that's right."

Once more Pier wondered if he should stop it. But he was also enjoying it a little, and so he let it go on.

Teo asked, "Do they squirt around like swallows? Quick-like?"

"I'll say they do." Red Joe coughed. He lifted a huge forkload onto the spreader. His bowed legs bent under it.

Exasperated, Teo tackled the manure pile viciously. Small blobs of it flew into the forepart of the spreader. "I sure wish I could see one a them flatfoots once. Just to make sure you wasn't feedin' me fish."

"Have a little patience, mister, an' you'll see one."

"You mean one could come flyin' around here any minute?"

"That's right."

"Any second? Right now?"

"If you watch close. Just you keep an eye on that side of the manure pile, an' I'll watch this side. We're bound to see one."

"Really?"

"That's right."

"Why would he come flyin' aroun' a manure pile?"

"He likes cow pies."

Teo turned to Pier again. "Pop, is that the true fact?"

"Wal, I guess so. I . . ."

Red Joe butted through. "Why sure it is."

Teo looked from one to the other.

"Just you wait, mister, you'll see."

A few moments later, Maybelle, Pier's favorite cow, stalked by with her camel-long legs, heading for the water tank near the wood-frame windmill. Without breaking her slow stride, she buckled her back and slopped dung on the ground in little round green-black puddles.

Red Joe behaved as if he had not seen it. And then suddenly, exclaiming, jumped to his right, and slapped his straw hat over something on the ground. "Hey, Teo, now I got one. Boy, is this a whopper. I can just feel him jumpin' an' tearin' around under my hat here." Red Joe made a pretense of holding down a formidable creature.

Pier cleared his throat. "Say, Red Joe, now ain't——"

Red Joe crossed his brows and winked heavily.

Pier stood uncertainly.

Teo dropped his fork instantly in the manure pile and stormed across the sloshy ground, Shep following. The boy fell flat on his stomach before the hat. "You sure, Red Joe?"

"Sure I'm sure. I kin feel him tryin' to get from under." Red Joe held down the hat by the brim.

Teo's eyes popped. "What shall we do with him?"

Shep sniffed at the hat and drew away.

Red Joe said, "Well, you can play with him. Flatfoots make nice pets."

"Do they?"

"Sure. They dirty yer hands a little, but they always stay with y'u."

"Oh."

"Go get a box, somethin' to put him in."

Teo sprang up. "Say, I know where one is. I made a little cornerib an' it's got cracks in the side so he kin breathe through."

"Good. Hurry an' get it."

"Okay." The boy sped away, his short quick legs churning like the whirling wings of an eggbeater.

"Say," began Pier, "I wouldn't do that if I was you. I don't——"

Red Joe bent a severe eye on him.

The next second Teo was back, breathless, holding the cagelike toy crib in one hand and his floppy straw hat in the other. "How shall I hold it?" the boy asked, crouching before the hat.

"Here," said Red Joe, spreading his bowlegs a little, "while I'm holding the hat down, you get ready to reach your hand in there. Then, when I lift the corner, you sneak in an' grab the flatfoot. The bastard."

Cautiously Red Joe lifted a corner.

Pier could stand it no longer. He reached down and ripped the hat from Red Joe's grasp. And there, on the ground, lay a green plop of Maybelle's dunging. The boy's pink hand was almost in it.

"Hey!" Red Joe roared, jumping up. "What the hell's the idea a spoilin' a little clean fun?"

Pier said nothing. He saw only the sudden surprise, the sudden hurt in the boy's eyes.

And Teo said, his face whitening, "Oh, Pop, you knew it all the time."

. 2 .

A day later, the village bells were sounding *Ring! go home, toilers, go home again*, just as Pier was unhitching the horses from the gang plow at the end of the big fifty east of the woodshed. He was tired, and grouchy. The day had been long.

He unhooked the bridles from the weary, puffing horses, threw them over the hames. He slapped the beasts on the rump and sent them toward the barn.

Stiff-legged, he stepped into the house a moment to refill his silver tobacco box. It was the one that Alde Romke had always used when

he ran the farm. Pier filled his pipe too, and then, seeing that silent Nertha had supper almost ready, hurried outside to finish the chores.

He found the sweaty horses drinking from the water tank beneath the windmill. He glanced to the right and saw the tank gate open. He cursed. "Teo!"

No answer.

"Teo! Goddammit, where are you?"

No answer.

"Teo, blast you, where the hell are y'u? Answer me! D'y'hear?"

There was a faint muffled sound to his right.

Pier glanced toward the tool shed. And there was the boy, slowly getting to his feet. He had been building something again. Pier's eyes fired. His lips thinned, trembled. "Teo!"

"What do you whaaaant?"

"God damn you, you damned little piece a pig grunt, what the hell was the idea a leaving that gate open?"

Teo came forward guiltily. "Well, I was just helpin' you, Pop. Didn't you want the horses watered?"

Pier mimicked him. " 'Didn't I want the horses watered?' . . . why, you pinched-off little squirt, I've told you agin an' agin never to water them horses when they're sweatin'. They'll catch pneumony that way." Just then Pier heard the kitchen door slam. Instantly he knew that Nertha had come around the side of the house to listen. He lowered his voice. "Sonny, you wanna listen to me when I tell you them little tricks a chorin'. It's the only way you'll learn to be a real farmer." Then Pier's anger rose again. It was humiliating to think that he might have been cowed by Nertha. "By God, Teo, if you don't learn pretty soon, I'm gonna have to kick you in the slats. I mean it. Now. Get them horses out a there until they cool off an' catch their breath. Hurry. March!"

Nertha was at his elbow. "Pier, is that boy your slave?"

Pier whirled. Her face, white from an inward burning, her eyes, white green as hail, startled him. He said, "I ain't orderin' that kid around. I'm only telling him what's what."

"Like tellin' him about flatfoots?"

Pier swallowed. So the lad had told her. "Aw, that was just a little joke. Besides, I stopped Red Joe in time."

"An' callin' him a damned little piece a . . ." She choked on the filthy words. "I suppose that was a joke too?"

"Wal . . ."

She wrung her hands. "Pier, can't you leave my baby alone? Can't you leave him at his playin' a little while longer yit? Ye're makin' a wise old man out a him. An' he ain't even had his growin' as a young man yit."

Pier scuffed his shoe in the soil.

· 3 ·

A few nights later Teo came home from the Starum Grammar School with a big red book. After the chores were done and the supper dishes washed, Teo got the book out from under a pile of mail-order catalogues on the first shelf in the pantry, and, lying down on his belly on the floor near the stove where the light of the kerosene pulldown lamp was brightest, began to read.

Pier sat by the stove, his feet perched up on the nickel railing, his chair tipped back on two legs, his eyes following the boy.

He saw Nertha look up from her patching, saw her smile at the lad, saw her stroke the goods in her hand.

Puffing on his corncob pipe, and still feeling out of sorts, he glanced at the red book now and then.

The cover intrigued him. It pictured a giant supporting a globe on his shoulders. Pier wondered what it meant.

Suddenly there welled up in him a regret, an aching envy. He had never learned to read. The boy was living in a world he would never see, or understand.

He wondered if the book talked about the farm, about the land and how men could make a living from it.

He asked, with a sideward glance at Nertha, "Teo, where'd you get that book?"

Without looking up, Teo answered, "From teacher. School."

"Uh-huh."

Pier puffed quietly, savoring the sweet pipestem, lightly blowing smoke rings.

Teo turned a page. The boy scratched himself. His tossed-up feet slowly pedaled the air. His chin was cupped in the palms of his hands. His back was as arched as a cock's.

"What's that picture mean, son?"

Teo blinked, looked up. He glanced at the cover of the book. "You mean, that?"

"Yeh."

"Oh, that's Atlas. Holding up the world."

"Uh-huh." Pier, seeing his corncob pipe was empty, filled it slowly and methodically. His thoughts milled awkwardly. He combed his rough red hair with callus-stiff fingers. "Some sort a bughouse fable, ain't it?"

Teo looked up, irritated. "What?"

"Ain't them bughouse fables ye're readin'?"

"No. They're true stories. They're in print."

"Uh-huh. What kind a true stories?"

Teo sighed and twisted on his belly. The boy's overall buttons squinched on the blue-gray linoleum floor. "Well, true stories, is all."

Pier squinted. The boy was getting into too many things he didn't know about. "Like what?"

Nertha looked up. "Pier, is the boy harmin' y'u with his readin'?"

"Why no," he said quickly. Then, collecting himself, he fired, "Say, ain't a father got a right to look into what books his son is readin'? I'm responsible fer his upbringin', ain't I?"

"Oh. I didn't know you could read," she said, looking to one side, smiling to herself.

Pier's ruddy face flamed hot red.

Nertha's eyes flicked at Teo. "Pier, you know that boy ain't doin' nothin' wrong. You know that."

"Goddammit, just the same I aim to look into what my boy's readin'." He turned to Teo. "Go on. Tell me. What else is there in that book a yers?"

Teo looked from one to the other, beginning slowly. "Well, there's . . . there's the story of the one-eyed man. The one what got blinded. Ever hear a him?"

"Not that I kin recollect, son."

"Well"—Teo took a deep breath, tried to pour it out before he took another—"well, there was a giant as big as a cottonwood tree whose name was Cyclops, an' he had an eye as big as a dishpan right in the middle of his head, an' he had sheep an' herded them up in a mountain, an' one night, comin' home, he found some little men in his cave an' he growled at them an' asked them, 'Hey, where'd you guys come from?' an' they said, 'We come from a far land an' we're

hungry, got any johnnycake an' syrup?' an' the one-eyed giant says, 'No, I ain't, but who are you? You look like thieves to me' "—Teo's voice sank lower and lower as he squeezed the air frugally through his voice box; then, as he took in another huge breath, yipped—"an' the giant grabbed up two of Uwisses' men——"

"Hey, not so fast there. Tell it decent. An' who's this Uwisses ye're talkin' about all of a sudden? Where'd he come from so quick?"

"Oh, he's the captain of the gang what got caught in the Cyclops' cave."

"Oh. All right, go on."

"Well, the giant grabbed up two of the men an' ate them up. Then Uwisses, he got mad an' he waited until the giant fell asleep an' then he heated up a big poker an' stuck it into the giant's sleepin' eye, an' then run away lickety-split. But the giant had shut the door of the cave with a stone, an' so Uwisses an' his men, they couldn't get out. Well, the next morning, when the giant was lettin' his sheep out of the cave, Uwisses had his men hang theirselves onto the long wool under the bellies of the sheeps. One by one they went past the giant, while he was feelin' over the tops an' sides of the sheep to make sure they didn't sneak out. But he never found them tight to the underbellies, hangin' on like cockleburs. That's how they got out. Well, then they ran down to their ship, puffin' an' scared. They hurried out to sea. An' when they was far enough away, so that the giant couldn't reach them with a stick, they hollered up to the giant, who was moanin' an' groanin', his eye hurt so, 'Well, how d'you like losin' yer eye, huh? You dirty bastard!' "

Pier dropped the front legs of his chair to the floor with a thump. "Hey, there, take it easy," he said anxiously, glancing at Nertha. "Cut out the swearin', boy."

For a second Nertha's eyes glinted like needles.

"But, Pop, that's what you say."

"Yeh . . . wal . . . anyway, it's not for little boys to say." Cautiously Pier arched his chair up on two legs again.

Nertha complained, "Pier, how many times must I tell you that if they'd a meant for you to sit on two legs they would a made your chair that way?"

"Aw, go to grass."

"Well, I don't care. When you rar' back like that, you cut holes in the linoleum. Besides, the chairs'll come apart that way."

"Oh, horse collar." Pier grumbled, and sucked on the delicious tobacco. He shrugged. He slid down in his chair.

The wood fire in the stove churned softly. The wind above the trees drew at the chimney with a soughing noise. The night was black outside the window.

Teo returned to his reading.

Pier turned the story over in his mind. It was a strange one. A strange one. He turned it this way, that way. He related it to his own life. Come to think of it, he thought, he was a lot like that blinded giant. He too had minded his *p*'s and *q*'s, had hoped and worked each year for a bumper, had seen an outsider come along to spoil his fun. Like the blinded Cyclops, a world lay outside his brain that would forever be dark to him. Teo might be able to glimpse it because he could read. But he himself would always have a mind darkness. And, to make the resemblance even more real, he too had heard somebody out there, an Alde Han, taunting him, bulloxing things up, yelling, "Wal, an' how do you like losin' yer crops, y'u sucker, you poor bastard?"

Pier puffed on his pipe, brooding.

The stove stirred beneath his feet. He dropped his armchair to the floor again, took off his heavy shoes, shoved them under the stove; and sat back, once more putting his feet on the nickel railing. He wiggled his toes inside his gray socks. The imprint of the shoe seams could be plainly seen on them. The toe ends were dusty.

He turned to the boy once more. "Any more stories like that in there?"

"Huh?"

"Any more stories like that in there? Come, talk to yer old man. Ye're gone in school all day, an' I'm out in the field . . . shucks, I don't get any benefit out a you atall no more. Come, talk to me."

"Well, did y'u ever hear the story of Hercules an' how he wrestled with Antaeus, the son of the earth?"

"No." Pier's eyes opened.

"Well, it was this way. Hercules an' Antaeus was always wrestlin'. Antaeus was awful strong, see. No man had ever come close to lickin' him. Except Hercules. He could. Only, whenever Hercules got him down on the ground, a funny thing 'ud happen. Hercules would have him down, an 'ud be hollerin' at him, 'Are you down? Are you down? Are you down?' when all of a sudden this Antaeus 'ud jump

right up as if somebody'd stuck him in the hinder with a poker."

"Hey, there. Watch yer tongue, Sonny."

"Well, it's the truth though, Pop. 'Cause you see, Antaeus, he had a trick. Nobody knew it, but his mother was the earth. All he had to do was to touch her when he was losin' an' he got strength again."

Pier nodded. There was some sense to that story too. He turned to the boy. "You know what that story means, don't you?"

"But Hercules, he . . . huh? What?"

"You know the real p'int of it, don't y'u?"

"No."

Pier puffed pompously. "Why, it's simple. Of course, when a man touches the earth, digs into it, he's bound to raise himself a crop. An' from his crop, get strength. Sure. Say, that's a hell . . . that's a mighty fine story, boy."

"Yeh. Well. Anyways, Hercules, he soon found out about that trick, so one day he wrestled him again, an' this time, he grabbed him up an' wrestled him up in the air. An' licked him."

"Uh-huh. But are you gettin' the real p'int of it, boy?"

Teo sighed. "Well . . . sure."

" 'Sure' what?"

"Well . . ."

"Uh-huh. Just like all kids, that's the part of a story you don't want to know about. What do you think them teachers give you them stories fer, just to read? Heck no. Just like a sermon, there's always a p'int to 'em."

Teo drooped over his book, bored.

Pier fired. "You sure think ye're smart, don't y'u! Know everything, don't y'u? Sure. Wal, let me tell you, mister, you don't know everything."

Teo hid his eyes.

Pier swung his feet to the floor. "All right. We'll see. Lookit. Tell me. How long does it take fer a Frisian-Holstein to get a calf?"

A quick smile thinned Teo's lips. "About two hundred an' eighty days."

"Uh . . . Wal, it does at that. So. An' what about a mare?"

"About three hundred forty."

"An' sows?"

"A hundred fourteen."

"An' a bitch?"

"About sixty."

"Say, where the hell did you learn all this?"

"Why, I read it in the privy. In that there ol' almanac you put n there fer grunt wipe. You see, sometimes it takes me a little while an' I read in—"

"Teo!" Nertha broke in coldly. "Teo, do you have to mention everything?"

"Well, but it's the truth, Mom."

"Can't you be a little more decent when you talk?"

"Sure, Mom."

"All right then."

But Pier wasn't through. "I'll bet you can't tell me when it's the right time to breed a heifer."

Teo puzzled. "Didn't you tell Grampap it was nineteen months?"

"Wal, I'll be a son of—"

Nertha jumped up. "Pier, does that boy have to know everything? Why do you lead him on so?"

"It don't hurt if it's about farmin', does it?"

"About bulls . . . an' such? At his age?"

"Sure."

She wrung her hands. "Pier, you'll be sorry someday, tellin' him all that dirty stuff. You'll ruin him. You'll make a woman chaser out of him."

"Oh, horse collar."

"Yes, you will." She paused, breathing unevenly. She stepped closer to the boy, tried to touch his hair, then his shoulder. But Teo drew away from her reaching hand.

The boy's evasive gesture raised a flame in her. "Yes. I know. Yer father's been turnin' you against me. I know."

"I have not!" Pier roared.

"I know, I know," she wailed. "Yes, an' I suppose the next thing y'u'll do is to tell him how far along with child I am. Tell him everything. Make me naked before him."

There was an instant stillness in the room.

Pier saw the big mouth of the world open around him a little. Through his mind there flashed the image of Devil's Gulch. Then his mind clicked to. He turned toward her, his mouth opening. "You mean . . . Nertha! When?" Tender interest, compassion, were suddenly in his voice.

She whitened. Her eyes rolled, became blank. She looked at the boy, at Pier, at the boy again.

Teo sat up, dropping the book to one side, a wondering look in his eyes.

· 4 ·

Well now. So. The year was going to be a good one after all. The earth might have thrown her crops, but Nertha was coming through with a son. Yessir. So. Shaking his head, talking to himself, Pier went about his work on the yard half dazed.

October days went by. The Indian summer lay mellowly on the land. Winds from the south sucked moisture from the soil, dried up the leaves of the cornstalks. The soft, sour corn shriveled on the cob.

All through corn picking Pier dreamed about the coming boy. He hunted in his mind for a name.

Yes, life was good again. Life was worth living at last. How wise he had been to buy that farm at Philosophy, South Dakota, after all. This new son would help him pay off the mortgage.

November too came up dry and warm. Slowly the husking season drew to an end.

At last the day came when he had but a few rows left.

He approached the end of the field behind the grove, mulling over a tangle of ideas. One moment he was chasing the idea of seducing Kaia, the next worrying that this new boy of his might be born a weakling. Sometimes his mind went blank. When a man husked corn, he moved too fast to think straight. The bumping and the hopping and the jumping from ear to ear jostled any thoughts a man might have.

He grabbed an ear with his mittened left hand, threw his right hand at it, ripped the thumb hook through the husks, gathered the husks into the fist of his left hand, jerked his right hand again, and, with the same motion, flipped the corn ear into the air to his right. The ear hit the bang board with a hollow thud. He noticed that the snap-crack of other years wasn't there. He jumped along the row grabbed, ripped, gathered, jerked, threw—grabbed, ripped, gathered, jerked, threw. Always there was an ear coming up off the stalk, always an ear flying in the air, always an ear just falling off the bang

board onto the soft mound in the three-box wagon. It was quick work; a whirl of hands.

He looked ahead. And rejoiced. Two more ears and he would be at the end. He glanced to his right. The grays, Maid and Mell, fat from eating in the field, nuzzled through the husks on the stalks. Sometimes they found ears he overlooked. He heard the rattly dry rasp of the rustling wind in the leaves of the corn. He stumped around on the powdery ground. His shoestrings were clotted with catchy tufts of pigeon grass. The smell of sour ensilage was in the air. His lips and nose crawled with the itchy, black smut of puff corn. Trailing wisps of spider threads floated and glistened in the falling afternoon sun. He threw up the last ear of the row.

As he stepped toward the wagon, he spotted still another ear on the ground. Groaning, he stooped to pick it up. He snapped his thumb hook at it. In an instant he had opened it out of its protective husk. He stared at the shriveled kernels soggily tight and studding the limp, red cob. He bit off a kernel, chewed it, tasted of its flour-like center, spat it out. He flipped the ear over in his mittened hand. A cutworm had bored a tunnel down a row of kernels. He flicked the gray-green insect off. It spun around and around, and fell into the rustling pigeon grass at his feet. Then he threw the ear into the load.

He stepped up on the running board, looked at the rough pile of orange corn. With his mittened fingers he clumsily pulled at his watch. A hole had been worn through the mitten and a shiny, abrased forefinger peered through. The watch, hanging from a braided leather chain tied to the bib front of his overall, popped out of its narrow pocket. It was three o'clock. He looked at the load again. The wagon was about half full. He was sure he could hold the last few rows.

It was chilly. The sunny sky did not warm the land. Pier slapped his arms around his shoulders.

Over his gray shirt he wore specially designed sleeves. Made of jean cloth, and stiff with red barn paint, they made his arms feel as bulky as legs. Through a hole at the end protruded his thumb. The sleeve fitted neatly under the mitten. Encased in the sleeve and mitten, a man felt safe walking through the rasp-sharp, bitter-edged corn leaves.

He crawled into the wagon, reached down, drew up the trusty,

sack-covered jug. He jerked out the cob cork. *P-fummb!* He cracked a twisting smile at the noise. He lifted the jug on an elbow, tipped the lip into his mouth, drank. *Glug-gleg, glug-glig,* the swallows went down. Air guggled past his loose lips. Finished, he recorked his jug, set it aside. He relaxed on the pile of corn. He pushed his cap back from his forehead. He sighed.

The drink disturbed his conscience. The level in the water tank had been low at noon hour. He had forgotten to turn on the windmill. He twisted his lips. He didn't feel up to walking to the yard. He was too tired. It was better to take a short rest. Besides, Teo might think of it when he came home from school.

Pier lay uneasy. Duty wrestled with fatigue. And at last he decided the boy, busy with his toymaking, was sure to overlook it. He would have to do it himself.

He stepped down off the wagon and plodded out of the cornfield, letting the horses stand untied and eating in the field.

When he stepped onto the hard path of the grove he kicked out his legs, snapping his foot, ridding himself of the dust in his trousers. Puffs flew up, vanished. Hunks of heavy dried mud broke off his heel, crashed onto the sucker growth of a maple before him. Suddenly light-footed, he loped swiftly through the grove and across the yard. He swung open the gate by the barn and stepped across the yard.

He found the tank empty. He nodded. He had guessed right. The windmill could turn for the rest of the afternoon. He released the brake.

When the mill didn't creak right away, he glanced up. The bonnetlike circle of blades was still indrawn. Swearing mildly at its stubbornness, he jerked a few times at the brake. The wire going up to the mill head whung-whanged against the wooden uprights of the derrick.

He stared upward, his throat taut, wondering what could be wrong. In the back of his mind a worry about the horses gnawed at him; a man couldn't leave them untied out there too long. They might founder if they ate too much raw corn, especially since it was so soggy this year. He snapped the lever sharply a few times more and then, exasperated, stepped back a ways to get a good clear look at the machinery riding fifty-six feet in the air above him.

Then he saw the trouble. The head had somehow got stuck and

was facing the wind. It looked like it had been run backward and had jammed tight. He cursed at the old wooden structure again. It was high time he got a new one, a shining galvanized beauty.

Wal, there was nothing else to do but crawl up the wooden ladder to the platform and, once there, turn the bonnet around and face the steel weathercock into the wind.

The wooden steps of the ladder creaked under his fingers. Some of the nails started; some sank out of sight when rungs pulled out a little. He remembered that again he had failed to repair the ladder. Somehow he had always been too busy to get around to it.

Climbing with mittens on was tough going. His fingers felt numb.

The higher he rose the chillier the wind became. It tugged at his shirt, pulled out an end of it, flapping it playfully against his leg. Dust swirled out of his thick sleeves. Once the thumb hook caught on wood and he almost missed a grab.

He looked down. The tank had shrunk to the size of a belly button. The poles beside it had become stiff gray hairs on the body of the earth. A dizzy feeling smoked up in his head. He looked up quickly.

He climbed. He rose higher than the roof of the barn. Above him the huge frilled bonnet swung slowly.

The wind hummed. It moaned in the crossbeams. The pull wire sang. The pump rods swayed in the center of the ever narrowing derrick. The beams became stubbier, the heavy outside uprights came nearer together. The platform loomed closer.

He was just entering the hole of the platform when the wooden rung in his right hand snapped off. His body lunged out a little. As he turned, the soles of his shoes squealed on the wood. His left hand tightened instinctively on the other rung. He hung on. He caught his breath.

Then, before his right hand could grab at a rung above, the other rung splintered. It broke into bits in his hand. Tipping back and down, he grabbed desperately at a lower rung. It too splintered. His body snapped together like a diver jackknifing.

A cry broke from him. Agonized, he twisted on the rung he stood on. With star-darting quickness his eye caught sight of a sudden movement on the earth beneath. An enemy had appeared. He saw black death below. It grinned up at him. It was as distinct as the red-gummed laugh of Devil's Gulch

His mind bristled, sparked quick ideas. He thought of a dozen ways to save himself. Time suddenly seemed to have become as elastic as rubber, to last as long as he wanted it to.

He saw that he had to jump out from the ladder. If he didn't, he would fall straight into the ever widening uprights at the bottom of the derrick. The coarse wooden beams would chew up his body like a threshing machine mangling a bundle.

He turned easily. His body flowed smoothly. It went where he wanted it to. He leaped. He had an extremely vivid picture of himself. He was a huge frog flying, his long frog legs dangling after, his forelegs outspread.

There flicked through his mind the picture of playful Indians falling from ponies, falling in a somersaulting roll, hitting the ground in a bouncing twist, coming to their feet in a rising jump, and never once hurting themselves.

The black earth came up to him with a rush. He saw the monstrous red gums thickening.

He smiled, tight-lipped. He was sure of himself. He had a plan. He bent his legs a little, readying himself for the somersaulting roll.

When he hit, his legs doubled under him, taking part of the shock; and then, surprisingly, as if they had suddenly become giant grasshopper legs, they threw him powerfully forward on his nose, rolling him over and over and over, head over heels and heels over head. Over and over.

Bones crunched loudly in his head. His blue cap flew off. Feeling left his limbs. A puff of smoke opened in his mind. It exploded upward. Blinding flashes of light flickered out to the ends of the earth. A sudden roar burst around him. He thought it was the earth-gums crunching him. Then all was quiet. Still. Calm.

He lay stunned. For one second he had the feeling he was entering a door, that it was shutting behind him, that a mouth was closing over him. He jerked. Wriggled. And managed to slip out again. The big mouth, drooling, overhappy, had been too sure of itself.

A little hesitant mind movement rippled. Too small to work at thinking, it was still alive enough to tell him that he had been fearfully hurt, that he was still Pier Frixen.

The baby thought grew up. He opened his eyes. He saw an enormous cow pile just before him. It was right at the end of his nose. He couldn't understand it. Cowpiles were usually no larger than

pies. Some no bigger than flatfoots. "Wal!" he thought. "Wal! This time I missed the manure pile."

The thought divided, became multitudes of multiplying thoughts. In an instant they were full-sized pains, shooting and stabbing and searing him in the side and the head and the legs. His nose began to feel heavy.

The pains were extremely pleasant pains.

He moved his legs experimentally. They worked. His arms. They worked too.

He got to his feet. He stood on one leg; then the other. It was a miracle. He had outwitted the Âlde Han again.

He swayed. He craved sleep.

A sprinkling on his clothes awoke him. Rain? He looked down, saw blood pouring on his overall bib front. Dumbly he followed the stream upward with his eyes, crossing them, and his fumbling, mittened hand. His nose was gushing. He felt it, and jumped. It was a mass of broken bone bits. It felt like the chewed-up end of a spare-rib.

He pulled out his red handkerchief and plugged his nose. It would have to do until he got to the house, where there were rags and soap and medicine.

He picked up his dusty cap.

He stumbled to the house. Entered.

Nertha gulked. Shrilled. "Ohh . . . ! Pier! An' now what have you done?" Shuddering, she looked to one side, cupping her eyes with her hand, as if he were too strong a light to be looked at.

"Fell from the mill," he mumbled, hooking up his cap behind the door. The handkerchief had become lumpy, scarlet. Blood began to spout again.

"Oh . . . ! Oh . . . !" Nertha whitened. She clutched at her throat. She sat down. "Oh, my God. An' now what next?" She shook her head, shuddering again. She said low, as if to herself, "Oh, he'll be the death a me yit."

He thumped down into his armchair by the stove. "Shut up. Get me some rags. An' a little soap. An' get me the iodine."

She shrank from him, gasping.

"Judas Priest t'hell, woman. Look, I'm the one that fell. Kin you get . . . aw hell, I'll get it myself." He got up from his armchair. "Where the hell is—"

"Sit down, man! Are you crazy?" she screamed. "Sit down. I'll get it. My goodness . . . Oh, you men! Yes, you'll be the death a me yit, Pier. Just watch. Ohh." She still gasped. "Fallin' off barns, fallin' off mills, fallin' . . . man, you could a fallen right into hell itself the way you've been cursing lately. Oh, if the Lord God in heaven don't punish you someday——"

"Shut up. Bring me them rags. What do you think yer Lord God did to me just now, kiss me?"

"Oh, you men! You blasphemers!" She ran to the closet underneath the stovepipe, jerked out an old white sheet, tore off a piece of it. She doubled it and handed it to him.

He muffled his nose in the clean rag. He opened the lid of the stove and dropped the scarlet handkerchief into the orange-red cob fire. It began to sizzle instantly, sent up a dull yellow smudge.

Nertha splashed cold water in a basin. She bathed the blood from his face, drawing up her mouth in great distaste. She cleaned up Pier's overalls and shirt.

She began to mop the floor on her hands and knees. She muttered to herself, shaking her head. "Comin' in the house like a man from a murderin', all bloody . . . my goodness, man, where did you fall from, the top a the windmill?"

He nodded. He took off his thumb hook, his mittens.

She looked past him, looked out of the window at the mill. "My God. Hundreds of feet. My God, that's terrible."

"It's fifty feet," he grunted through the reddening rag.

Suddenly a lump of blood slid into his throat. He coughed. He coughed again and hauled it up with his tongue and, lifting the lid of the stove again, spat out the ball of coagulated blood. "Goddamn stuff. It's bleedin' in the back there too. Give me another rag." He grabbed a piece from under her arm and balled it up. Opening wide his blood-stringy mouth, he thrust the wad of cloth up into the nasal passage in the back of his mouth. "There," he mumbled. "There, that'll hold that." It felt as if he had jabbed a fat, scabby potato into his throat.

"Man, man, you better go to the doctor," Nertha said, getting to her feet. She emptied the mop pail of its gray-red flood. She came over and took the rag from his nose and replaced it with a clean one. She swished the pinked rag in the pan. "You've probably hurt yerself terrible. I better go to Red Joe an' call him."

He shook his head.

"But, man, don't you want me to call Dr. Helder?"

Pier drew the ball of bloody cloth from his mouth and growled, "All he'll do is give me a couple a pills fer my pains. An' the pains I kin stand." He jammed the ball into his throat again. In those few seconds, a new stream of blood had gushed into it, descending to the edge of his windpipe. He coughed thickly.

"But your legs, man. Are y'u sure you didn't break any bones anywheres?"

He waved her away. He threw his feet up on the fuel box.

Biting his teeth, he put his hand over his broken nose, punched and pinched it around. He worked grimly. The little chipped bones crunched and ground against each other in his fingers. He molded the pulpy mass into what he thought would make a good-looking nose. He sat still, holding his hand over it, waiting. "Let it mend," he thought, "let it mend."

He sagged down in his chair. He huddled against the stove. He would wait out the pain. He would sit here by the warm fire until he had healed.

Teo burst in from school. "Hey, Mom. Pop's had a runaway 'cause I saw his horses goin' crossways across the field an' he was nowheres . . . oh!"

There was a silence. Teo took a deep breath.

"Yes, 'oh' is right," Nertha said. "You kin say that again. That father a yers . . . oh, son, he fell from the windmill. An' for all I know, he's maybe dyin' right now."

Teo came slowly across the kitchen.

Pier glanced at him, tightening his lips. The boy's eyes were full of sudden tears.

Nertha wailed on. "Yes. Just look at that man there. Your father. That wonderful father a yers. There he sits. All bunged up. Broken. An' he won't get no doctor. Oh no. Not him. He knows better, he says. Knows better. Oh! Sometimes I think I married a monster. A thing more beast, more bull, than man. Always rammin' his head against things."

Teo touched his arm. "Pop. Y'u hurt bad?"

Pier shook his head, slowly.

"Can't you talk, Pop?"

Pier pointed to his throat. Then, withdrawing the rag from his

mouth, he said, in a moisture-rattling voice, "I'm all right, boy. Get t'yer chorin'."

Teo snapped upright. The words were magic. "Okay, Pop." The boy unhooked the suspenders of his school overall. "Okay, Pop. I'll do the whole works. Get the horses from the field, pump the water, feed the cows, feed the pigs. I'll even milk Princess. You kin count on me. An' tomorry, if you want me to, I'll even stay home from school."

Pier sat still. In his mind he saw again the vision of the earth opening. Through a rent, through an endless depth, he had seen gray eternity. The rent had been wide, the depth blackly deep.

His nose thickened. It felt like a swelling watermelon. It became so heavy, made him feel so lopsided, he had all he could do to keep from falling out of his armchair.

A sleepy feeling came over him. He went numb.

4. WASTE

. I .

IT WAS AFTER SUPPER, AND DARK.

A heifer was about to calve, and Pier went out with a lantern to have a look at her. He had just stepped inside the barn when he heard a car drive on the yard. He stopped to listen. He heard the car door slam. The sound was muffled. In a moment steps sounded on the frozen ground outside. The latch rattled, and both the bottom and the top barn doors opened. It was Red Joe. He had come over in his new secondhand truck.

"Hi, neighbor," Pier greeted, holding aloft the lantern to get a better view of his spider-legged neighbor.

"Hi, yerself." Red Joe closed the doors and stepped toward Pier.

The straw and dried alfalfa stalks in the alley crackled beneath the man's rubber boots. "What's goin' on? Expectin' another calf?"

"Yeh."

Red Joe looked at the reclining heifer. "Looks a little like Princess. One a hers?" Red Joe chewed slowly on his quid. He sprayed a sluice of tobacco to one side.

Pier glanced at the spotted black-and-white too. "Yeh. An' it looks like she's gonna throw twins. I been feelin' her an' I think she's got two in her."

"Uh-huh."

"It's pretty hard to breed Frisian-Holsteins so they throw twins, but at last I think I did her."

"Yes." Red Joe glanced up at him. He stared. "Holy jumpin' Jehoshaphat! What the hell happened t'you, man?" For a moment Red Joe's quick small eyes wiggled like the unsteady needle of a compass, then held steady on him. He stopped chewing. "Who bopped you one?"

Pier pulled at his blue woolen cap, smiled sheepishly, said nothing.

"Say, my kid Jimmy was sayin' you'd jumped off the windmill, but I thought he was only gassin'. . . . Naw, you really didn't, did you?"

"Wal, I tried."

"Well, I'll be a piece a concentrated owl crap. How far did you fall?"

"From the top," Pier said, trying to hide a smile.

"Well I'll be . . ." Red Joe spat. "By God, man, then ye're plumb lucky to be standin' here alive in front a me today, ain't you? Man, you could a busted every goddamned blessed bone in yer body. What did you do, land in a manure pile?"

"Wal . . . not quite."

"I'll be a son of a bitch. If that don't beat all."

"Yeh. Wal, the goddanged ladder broke up in my hands an' so I hadda jump. It was a close call."

"Nose still hurt?"

"Wal, it ain't happy." Pier touched the end of it gingerly. "Smarts a little. Feels a little squinchy. Like it's a bag full a bug bones."

"Uh-huh. Anything else broke?"

"Nope. Not that I know of. Everything seems to be workin'."

"Pretty lucky."

"Yep, guess I was at that."

"Uh-huh."

Pier looked at the swollen heifer to divert Red Joe's attention.

"Say," Red Joe said suddenly, "reason I came was, you goin' huntin' tomorry?"

"Huntin'?"

"Yeh. A whole gang of us is goin'. We're organizin' two flyin' crescents. Batch a fellers are startin' from the north, from Gitchie Manitou way there, an' another batch is startin' up from the south, from Sioux City, there where the Ol' Missouri takes its turn."

"What fer?"

"Kill the goddamn fox, wolves, kiyotees. An' all a God's critters what's molestin' the farmer. An' landlords an' bankers, if you see any."

Pier laughed.

"Sure. Lots a people losin' chickens an' sheep. Some even hogs. An' cattle."

Pier straightened. "Say, maybe that's why my chickens're disappearin'."

"Sure, man." Red Joe pushed his sheepskin collar away from his face.

Pier nodded. "So that's it. I knew the croup couldn't be gettin' 'em that fast. Wal, when y'u startin'?"

"We're all meetin' in front a Herman Brackx's Beer & Billiard at ten in the mornin'. We're leavin' in trucks that'll take us to the startin' line, an' then we'll work south till we meet them galoots comin' up from Sioux City."

"Usin' yer truck?"

"No. Don't dare. Got a knock."

"An' you just bought it a week ago!"

"Yeh. They hid the loose bearings in that engine with a lot of axle grease an' sawdust. Went down to make Blacktail do something about it today but his mechanic Dirty-shirt Schultz was drunk."

"He workin' fer him now too?"

"Yeh."

"Huh. Say, is this flyin' crescent legal?"

"Sure. Sheriff Rexwinkel organized it. He called everybody up. Got Central to give a general ring on the telephone."

Pier nodded. "You know, I think I will go. I ain't much fer killin', but, by God, them varmints eatin' my chickens, that's different. Besides, I'm kind've the mood fer shootin' anyway." Again he touched his nose lightly. "Y'u damn well right y'u kin figger on me."

"Well, on the way in, why don't you swing around an' pick me up?"

"I'll do that."

"Okay. Be seein' you then."

"Take it easy."

"The same to yerself, mister." Red Joe opened the door and stepped outside.

The nine o'clock bells began to ring:

To bed, to bed, my children.

. 2 .

Up bright and early, chores finished, Pier dressed in an old overall and a blue-black mackinaw. He pulled on a pair of tough red buckle boots. He picked up the 12-gauge shotgun that he had cleaned and oiled the night before, and filled his pockets, both overall and mackinaw, with yellow-bellied shells. He grunted a good-by to Nertha, said a firm "No" to Teo's "Kin I go too, Pop?" and drove off toward Red Joe's. As he bumped the Buick along over the frozen road, he sniffed at the air, savoring the weather. He looked up at the sky. Queer wisps of thin clouds barely hid the sun.

Red Joe was waiting for him. Dressed in tan hunting clothes, Red Joe seemed more compact than usual. Like a crab, he crawled into the car.

Pier had an impulse to sing as he drove down the hill past Kaia's lilac-fringed lane. The day was going to be a holiday. He looked forward to the gun blasting.

They drove into town. Main Street was already lined with cars, and the sidewalks and doorways were thronged with weathered, red-faced men. Most of the farmers were wearing blue denim overalls and jackets. They were so thick on the street that they looked like blue-black flies crawling in and out of a row of honey jars. Guns bristled. Cars popped. Hounds, shepherds, collies, mongrels, smelled men's legs, barked, sniffed each other, and milled around like excited children.

Pier got out of the car with Red Joe and strode toward the Beer & Billiard. He saw many farmers he had seen but once or twice before in his life. They greeted him, smiling, shaking their heads, acting as if it were a miracle that they had managed to live long enough to meet again. They winked and nodded. They bumped and jostled. They jutted out elbows. They puffed importantly on fresh cigars. They jammed heavy hams of hands bulging into pockets.

Some were his friends: the bachelor Grimovich brothers, Ol' Spit Triggs, the Brandt boys, Milkman Platte.

He saw Blacktail too. The slim, mustached man was wearing his deputy sheriff badge openly today.

Looking around, he saw Âlde Romke and Âlde Folkwâlda come humping down the street on their old mule legs. Narrowing his eyes, he decided it might be a good idea to keep the two old men steered clear of Blacktail. Either one of the old men might blurt out some more evidence that Âlde Romke was seining the Big Sioux. And if either as much as hinted that the old man was brewing whisky-strong homemade beer in defiance of Prohibition . . . good night, Âlde Romke.

"Hi, Pa. How's life?"

"Oh, thin in spots, but it goes on." Âlde Romke smiled. His toothless gums shone red. For a second the old man's mouth looked exactly like Devil's Gulch.

"So it does."

"An' how is it . . ." Alde Romke stared at Pier's nose. "What happened to you?"

"Oh, I bumped something."

"Huh. So. Well, an' how is Sonny?" Âlde Romke jammed his veined, gnarled hands into the pockets of his gray jacket.

"Fine. Fine. He's runnin' the farm already."

The old man tugged at his white beard. "Ae. Ae. Pretty soon he'll kick you out of the armchair just like you did me."

"Oh no. I bought a farm t'Philosophy, South Dakota, fer just that reason."

The old man said nothing. He looked to tubby Âlde Folkwâlda for sympathy.

"Where's yer shotgun, Pa?"

"Gun?" Âlde Romke looked aggrieved. "Soan! You know I never use shotguns on God's poor creatures."

"Oh? An' I suppose yer wholesale fishin' fer His fish is all right?"

Âlde Romke lifted his wrinkled face in great disdain. "Soan, the little fishin' I do with my mite of a seine is hurting no one. Besides, I fish just enough for our use. No more. I waste nothing. But shotguns . . . ae, that's straight murdering."

Red Joe broke in. "Hey, look. There's Kaia's brother. Stephan. Mr. Memek."

Pier grunted. He stepped aside and leaned against the front of the beer hall. Shambling like a lost sheep, Stephan looked from face to face, ahunt for a smile. His angleworm brain was barely strong enough to light up his eyes.

"You know," Red Joe whispered, "Stephan always reminds me of a dog I once had. I docked the danged thing, an' from that time on, Albert, that was the dog's name, from that time on, Albert was a lost dog. He didn't know where he belonged. The male dogs'd smell him over, an' then pull away, puzzled. The bitches'd look him over an' wonder why he wasn't tryin' to foolish 'em."

Pier laughed. "An' what'd Albert do?"

"He just couldn't figure it out, just couldn't understand why the hell the males was smellin' him up so. Sometimes they got too curious, an' then he'd set down. Or he'd run to the bitches, hopin' they'd play with him. Yessir, he was really a mixed-up dog. Yessir."

Stephan saw them then and a smile instantly replaced the glaze in his eyes.

Pier, and Âlde Romke and Âlde Folkwâlda, nodded to him.

Red Joe smirked. "Well, Stephan, an' how's yer sis been treatin' you lately?"

Pier turned on the tormentor. "Lay off, will y'u? If you wanna rag somebody, rag me."

Red Joe quieted.

Domeny Beckstrom strolled by, incongruously dressed in civilian clothes.

"Hi, Domeny. Goin' huntin' too?"

"That's right." Domeny Beckstrom smiled condescendingly. He wore a tight gray hat and his bunched white hair struggled to get out along the edges.

"I thought domenys didn't like to kill."

"In its place, Pier, in its place." The domeny's pink lips twisted into a wise grimace. He held his head sideways. "When shepherd

boy David met a lion and a bear in the way, killing his sheep, he slew them, didn't he?"

Pier looked down.

"Yes, Pier." The domeny laid his hand for a moment on Pier's shoulder, then moved on.

"Huh," grunted Red Joe. "Who was this David feller?"

Pier didn't answer. He felt uncomfortable. Usually he had impulses to admire religious people, to admire powerful statements from the Bible, but every time he met Old White Wings Himself, he began to have grave doubts about the spiritual.

Someone tugged at his arm.

Pier whirled. It was the Old Dreamer. "Oh. Hi, Pederson. By God, the town's full a preachers today."

County Agent Pederson nodded, and smiled slowly. He nodded to the old men, and to Red Joe. He turned his quiet gray eyes on Pier. "Well, Pier, did you have a good year?"

"Oh, tolerable." Pier rubbed his still thick, blue-black nose gingerly.

Pederson cocked his head sideways. He turned his tan cap on his head a little. "Your land still living with you, Pier?"

Pier thinned his eyelids. "Pederson, sometimes I got half a notion to flatten that long nose a yers."

"Why don't you? I'd still say you could be a good farmer. Could."

Pier put his hand full around the other's thin arm. He tried to appear jovial, but his grip was firm. "Why are you always stickin' that fork inta me, Pederson?"

Pederson looked at the others and then lowered his voice so that only Pier could hear. "There's only one reason, Pier. You're one of the king bees in this neck of the woods."

"Aw, horse collar."

"And if I can make a convert out of you, why, I'll convert the whole neighborhood to right farming, to soil conservation, to controlled grazing."

"Huh. Nobody pays any attention to me," Pier growled, though inwardly a little pleased.

"The hell they don't. When a man consistently raises taller corn, better grain, than anybody else, he can't help but have people envy him."

"Oh nuts."

"It's a hard-iron fact, Pier. There's no use for me to talk to them direct. They'll never listen. But if you start contour plowing, and so on, they'll follow. They may not exactly love you, but they'll follow. They all like to make money."

"Huh."

Red Joe stepped nearer. "Say, what're you two birds sneakin' about there?"

Pederson laughed easily. "I was just telling Pier what a poor farmer he was."

Red Joe spat to one side. "Come again?"

Pederson smiled again. He looked at Pier with a knowing look. "You see, Pier?"

"Huh."

Âlde Romke touched his arm. "Soan, I got to go to the store for the old lady before we go. I got to get some sugar, an' rusks, an' some butter."

"Did she have to put you to work the last minute?"

Âlde Folkwâlda grunted, "Ae, an' that's what I been tellin' him." The tubby old man thrust his worn hands into the pockets of his blue jacket.

Âlde Romke bowed his head. "Ae, but if I don't get the stuff, she'll spend the next week crying her fingers crooked. Besides, I got some things for myself to get."

Pier grumbled. "You'll miss yer ride, Pa."

Red Joe looked at the crowd. "Oh hell, Pier, they won't be ready for another half hour yit."

Pier shrugged, and gave up. They trudged toward the Starum Mercantile, Pier and Red Joe with their guns slung under their arms.

The store was crowded with men purchasing last-minute provisions for the hunt. Some were buying smoking tobacco—Bull Durham, Velvet, Prince Albert; some were buying cigarettes—Camels, Chesterfields; some were buying chewing tobacco—Beechnut, Long Distance; some were buying cigars—White Owl, Bobby Burns.

A few farmers were crowded around the potbellied stove in back. An open barrel stood near, and with ham-heavy arms they reached in now and then for fresh handfuls of smoked herring. Other men were smacking their lips over crackers and dried pears.

Pier dropped in an ear to listen.

"I tell you, it's a disgrace to the community," Milkman Platte was saying, wiggling his big, blackhead-pocked nose.

"What is?" Pier asked, his eyes lifting.

"Bobbed hair. It's gonna be the ruination of wimmen." Milkman Platte sniffed up a drop of clear moisture.

Red Joe snickered. "Platte, what difference does it make to you? You never get next to 'em anyway. Hell, you wouldn't know a virgin from a hole in the ground." Red Joe lifted his lip and with a quick *puert* of his tongue, hit the red-hot stove with a flip of tobacco juice. The spot instantly grayed, sizzled, smoked, and then became red again.

There was a blast of loud laughter.

Old Platte went on. "An' them short dresses. Why a man dassn't walk down the street, except backwards, so he won't see all that shame comin' at him."

The raw-faced men guggled again.

Pier laughed too. And then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Âlde Romke and Âlde Folkwâlda had gotten into an argument with Weasel Willie Rexwinkel, the clerk. He stepped up behind the two old men. Willie, grown into a slim dandy, waved quick fluid fingers. Behind him towered shelf above shelf of dry goods: cereal, shoeblack, cans of baking powder, jars of pickled herring, bolts of gingham, shoeboxes.

"What's wrong here?" Pier asked.

Âlde Romke whirled. "Pier, this son of Balaam says he ain't got any malt."

Pier tightened. Malt? What did the old man . . . ? Oh yes. Homebrew beer. "Oh wal, Pa, you don't really need that, do you?"

"Soan, I ain't buyin' a thing until I get that malt."

"What do you want it for?" Weasel Willie asked, quirking his dog-bright eyes significantly.

Âlde Romke lifted a proud eye. "To wash my beard in it."

"Well, we ain't got none. We got orders."

"From whom?"

"Mr. Puddicombe said we was not to sell it."

"That bastert fan Babylon!" ejaculated Âlde Folkwâlda, shaking his head, rubbing his potbelly. "That son of a bitsie."

"Now, now," Pier said, "it ain't that bad." He tugged at Âlde

Romke. "C'mon. They're goin' in a minute or two. You better hurry, if you're gonna bring home them groceries before we go."

Grumbling, Âlde Romke gave the rest of his order.

Pier and Red Joe were standing around in front of the Beer & Billiard, and Âlde Romke and Âlde Folkwàlda had just come back from their errand, when there was a movement on the beer-hall steps. Something important seemed about to happen at last. Pier looked over the crowding blue-clad men. "Why, it's Ain'it Shraeder, the depity."

Red Joe stretched his neck too. "Yip, it is."

A short, quick-nodding man climbed to the top step. The man shouted something. The babbling voices drowned his voice. He leaned over to say something to a man near by. He nodded like a nervous blackbird at another who had shouted a pleasantry. Once more he tried to drive his voice through the crowd. A swing door opened behind him and beer bibbers, joining the crowd, scuffling, almost upset him. He raised a fist as if to give them a beating. They raised theirs. They put on an act of being highly insulted. A change in whim and it broke up.

Finally the men became silent. Like a noisy cross saw, Deputy Ain'it's voice worked through the wood-stiff crowd. "All right, men, we're ready to start off. Got a dozen trucks lined up an' more comin'. An' "—his face wrinkled as a shout went up—"an' everybody's t'get on. Now. One thing. Nobody is allowed t'take rifles. It's only shotguns. Those who ain't got that kin go along as chasers. An' be careful, men." His voice mellowed. "We don't want some poor woman a widder tonight because of some foolish trigger. That'd be too bad. Ain'it so? All right. Another thing. The trucks that's takin' us out will try to meet us somewhere south a the Grimovich farm. Somewhere toward Canton. Near the Ski Slide there. The drivers have been ordered to follow us. If they can. An' another thing. We start out about a hundred yards apart. We come sweepin', movin' down from the Palisades, on both sides a the river. One half the men'll come down from Sometimes and then across Blood Run Creek here, an' then over the Frixen farm. The other half the other side a the river, from Squaw Tit down past Philosophy there. Now. The idee is not to shoot much in the beginnin', fellers. Otherwise we'll scare the critters out a the crescent. Ain'it so? So. Don't

be whole hog at the trough. No. We'll chase 'em on ahead till we meet the Sioux City crescent comin' up there past them bald-headed Newton Hills. Then, when the ends meet, we'll close in. As the circle gets smaller, we'll give 'em hell. We'll blast the livin' daylights out a everything what moves. Kiyotees, wolf, fox, jack rabbits, cottontails. Out a everything what moves this side a hell."

A shout erupted. Guns snapped. Trigger locks clicked. Blue barrels gleamed in the weak light. Men spat, chewed. Some scratched themselves. Some swung out a leg and pinched at itches in their crotches. Puffs of tobacco smoke rose everywhere.

Pier found himself on a huge truck with Red Joe, Âlde Romke, Âlde Folkwâlda, Blacktail, Ol' Spit Triggs, Otto Grimovich, and others.

The truck jostled along. The men stood leaning on their guns, looking through the slats of the truck at the passing land. The two old men gaped at the commotion like bewildered children.

Soon the truck stopped.

Deputy Ain'it jumped out of the driver's cab up front. "Okay, men. Half a you get out an' start spreadin'. A hundred yards apart. An' don't shoot till we get t'meet the boys from the south. All right. Everything's okay, ain'it?" His quick head turned around on his shoulders like the cock head of a nervous weathervane. His black eyes and black hair gleamed beneath his yellow corduroy cap.

Half of the men piled out: Pier, Âlde Romke, Red Joe, Âlde Folkwâlda, Blacktail, Otto, and Ol' Spit Triggs.

With Red Joe, Pier stepped across the three-strand barbwire fence and strolled easily down a corn row.

Spread-cagling over the rolling hummocks of the country, the flying crescent straightened out and began working south. Over the swelling bosses and swirls and the knolls of the land the hunters moved like a giant comb. Down the ridges where the growth was thickest, the men worked close together. Up on the hills they walked almost out of sight of each other. Dogs ran ahead, smelling, sometimes chasing, barking, and coming back when a master shrilled a whistle with a cocked thumb and forefinger.

Walking became heavy. Sticks of dead weeds and wind- and man-tossed cornstalks obstructed every step.

Red Joe growled across to Pier, "Some farmers kin farm about as good as my kid Jimmy."

"Yeh."

"I te' y'u, they might just as well let their goddamned farm grow up to weeds. Look at this patch here. Cripety sakes alive."

Pier laughed. Red Joe was lost from sight for a moment in dead rattling weeds. All Pier could catch was the sound of scrambling. Then Red Joe emerged, covered with the caterpillarlike tufts of pigeon-grass seeds.

A fat, gray jack rabbit popped out of the brush.

Pier lifted his gun automatically, then held his fire.

Red Joe looked at it with astonished eyes. "Well, there's the first varmint of the day. A jackass rabbit. Guess it was worth goin' through there at that. Boy, ain't he a fat bastard?"

"Yeh. An' lookit him jump. Like a kangaroo."

"Ever see a kang?"

"Nope. But that's the way they jump."

"Uh-huh."

"Ain't seen hide ner hair of a kiyotee or a wolf, has y'u?"

"Not yit."

Pier walked along with his gun hanging through his crooked arm. A wind frisked at his neck and he drew his mackinaw collar up close. He kicked at the crossed weeds and the tangle of cornstalks. Sharp cutting leaves brushed against his clothes. There was a constant noise of crackling, rasping, rattling.

They toe-topped another rise. They strolled down a tipped tableland toward Pederson's five-acre place. The cornstalks stood at an angle on the slope.

They came upon the banks of Blood Run Creek, just north of Pier's farm. To the left stank Ol' Spit Triggs's rendering works.

They stopped and instantly the noise of walking ceased. It became solemnly still around.

Pier said, "It's so quiet out here, a man kin hear his ears tick."

"Yeh."

A film of ice lay over the surface of the stream below.

"Think she'll hold us?" Red Joe asked.

"Nope. We're bound to fall through. Wait. There's a crossover along here somewheres. Some steppin'stones. Yeh. There."

Red Joe nodded and, holding up his gun, stepped carefully down the sandy bank. He slipped. He slid to the bottom in a clattering avalanche of stones.

Pier followed him. "This crossover is where the crik got its name."

Red Joe looked over his shoulder, his eyes quizzical. "How so?"

"Didn't you never hear that?"

"No."

"Not? Wal, once a trapper was comin' through here with a Sioux Indian friend. They was cutting down a dead tree to build a fire. The ax slipped an' cut the feller's foot. An' the Sioux Indian says, 'Ho! Blood Run.' "

"Is that a fact, huh?"

"Yeh. That's what Old Dreamer Pederson says."

Red Joe remembered something. "Say, come t'think of it, Squaw Tit got its name something just like that. Ever hear about that?"

"No, don't think I ever did."

"Well . . ." Red Joe chuckled. "You know how that little red-brown butte near Squaw Tit sticks up?"

"Yeh."

"Well, the way they tell it a trapper was stopping there to fix himself a little grub over a fire, when he happened to look up an' see this butte. He looked at it awhile an' then it popped into his head that it looked just like the sloppy tit of a squaw he'd played with the night before. You know, with the nipple just sinkin' a little into the flesh?"

Pier laughed.

"Yeh, Pier, a feller never stops to realize that a few years ago this was wild Indian country. Wild."

Pier nodded. He had a quick vision of Ålde Romke and Ma Lysbeth driving on it in their prairie schooner, years and years ago.

Pier came to a wide passage in the creek gully. He said, "Wal, here it is. Cross over them stones an' you'll be all right. Even if you slip in, it won't go over your four-bucklers."

"Uh-huh."

They started carefully, holding out their guns, balancing.

Red Joe's foot slipped and plunged through the thin ice. Water splashed silver in the vague gray light of the day. "Dammit t'hell," Red Joe muttered.

"Watch yer step," Pier said mechanically.

Then they were over.

As he climbed the south bank, Pier recalled that he had planned

to keep an eye out for Âlde Romke and Blacktail. He ran to an eminence and looked west.

Âlde Romke was just emerging from the gully too. He had picked up a long stick somewhere and was using it as a cane. Blacktail was nowhere to be seen. Relieved, Pier waved and yelled, "How goes it, Pa?"

"Oh . . . good. Perfect good." Alde Romke's low-crotch pants gave his legs a webbed-together effect.

Pier nodded. "You know, you shouldn't really be traipsin' around all over the country on them old legs a yern."

Âlde Romke's light blue eyes filled with mock hurt. "Old legs? Why, soan, I can outwalk you any day of the week. Old. Huh!" Âlde Romke swung out a short bowed leg. The low crotch almost threw him.

Pier laughed. "Yer side-kick, Âlde Folkwâlda, he don't seem to be doin' so well though." Pier pointed.

A few hundred feet beyond to the west, Âlde Folkwâlda was struggling to climb out of the gully.

Âlde Romke's eyes gleamed and he raised his voice to throw it far enough for the other to hear. "Ae, but that's because Âlde's a city bird, with nothing to do but sit in that city scale office of his all day."

Âlde Folkwâlda, emerging at last, and puffing, raised a doubled fist. He tried to smile. His bloodshot blue eyes rolled. His compact potbelly heaved.

"Freon, sil ik dy hwat helpe?" Âlde Romke asked with pretended concern.

Âlde Folkwâlda sat down on a red stone and began to fan his flushed face with his cap. "Ah. It sit hjir goed."

Red Joe, watching with covert eyes, said, "By God, you know, Pier, I really believe that old man a yers could show a heifer a trick or two."

Âlde Romke blew up his cheeks and swaggered. "A trick or two? Why, Wo'dammit, man, point me out a heifer girl an' I'll show you why the good Lord grows bushes."

Pier lighted his pipe, smiling. "I suppose Ma Lysbeth ain't interested in them tricks a yers no more?"

"That woman? Soan, she's as much fun as yesterday's pancake."

Red Joe roared. "By God, you know, at that it would be fun to

trade yer wife in for a new one. Say, a nice little sixteen year-old milk-fed, like to bust with git an' go."

Pier nodded. "Wives do get pretty flat at that."

Red Joe rolled his quid from one cheek to the other. He spat out loose bits of tobacco. "Flat is right. An' that's why I once took on one a them Sioux Falls All Nations wimmen. Colored."

Pier and the others instantly stiffened with interest. Sudden flames lighted their eyes.

Pier asked, "How was it? Any good?"

"Listen, mister. If you want fun, that's it."

"Is that so? Wal."

"Yeh." Red Joe looked solemnly at the ground. "An' say, you fellers may not believe me when I say this, but I like colored people. Sioux Indians. Negroes. Chinks. They're swell. They get more downright honest fun out of life than you or me. It's a shame they only get the crumbs from our tables. They deserve more."

Pier said quickly, "Wal, don't get me wrong. I ain't got nothin' agin 'em either. Except that red skin and black skin and yellow skin does seem kind a funny. Do they feel funny when you touch 'em?"

"I don't get you."

"Like . . . wal, I dunno. Just funny?"

"Look, Pier. Does that black hair on yer Frisian cows feel different from the white hair they got?"

"No."

"Well then. Sure, they touch like the rest a us. An', what's more, they're warm. They feel friendly an' clost. They're swell people, colored people are. All they need is a dog's chance. An' they'll do better with it than we did."

Âlde Romke raised a hand. "Now, Boys. Up! They're leavin' us far behind."

"Are y'u rested?" Pier asked Âlde Folkwâlda.

The old man nodded. He stood up and, still out of breath a little, walked over to take his place in the line. Âlde Romke followed him.

The men started up the hill. They hurried. Soon they had the line straightened out again. By the time Pier and Red Joe had topped the rise of Red Bluff, a moving line of men six miles wide could be seen slowly edging through the fields and pastures and farmyards, over bluffs and rising lifts in the prairie land.

It was after they had walked across both Pier's and Grimoviches' farms that the land began to move with life. Jack rabbits, cottontails, badgers, gophers, fox squirrels, pheasants, prairie chickens, grouse, dodged ahead. Even a reindeer flagged tail-white out of the land. The gray fur of each creature looked like a flying lump of sun-faded soil. Each tuft of grass and tangled swirl of cornstalk and corn leaf became a vortex of sudden movement and sound, the swift scattering of fleeing life.

Soon guns began to roar, popping irregularly.

Red Joe sang out, "Some people got itchy fingers, ain't they?"

"Yeh. Some blind fools just like to kill fer killin', is all."

"D'you suppose they're carryin' the dead?"

"Hell no. Besides, most a them shots is just wild. Most guys couldn't hit the broad side of a barn if they tried."

Red Joe laughed. "Well, they could if they was to use their private gun, from the looks a their families."

Pier asked slyly, "Wonder what a man's aimin' at goin' after black oak, chocolate drops?"

Red Joe threw a quick glance at Pier, said nothing.

Pier went on. "Is it true y'u ain't lived until you've split black oak, Red Joe?"

Red Joe's voice edged with a sharpness. "Y'u keep askin' all the time . . . why don't you try it, Pier?"

Pier swallowed.

"An' don't call them colored people names. Oh sure, of course, you'll find bad eggs among 'em, just like with us. Whores, buggers, and such like. But by an' large, over all, they're as good as we are."

Pier felt ashamed. He kicked at a clod. What would Nertha think of such talk? He strode along. Then realized that the Nertha he was thinking of was the wedding-day virgin, not the old woman he now had in the house.

He kicked at another clod. Such thinking wasn't fair to her. She was really a good woman. She was the mother of Teo, and soon to be the mother of his second boy. "It's funny," he muttered to himself, "but when a bunch a dogs get together, waggin' tails, they always get to talkin' about breedin' wimmen."

More and more, the guns began to roar to either side. Once Pier himself let fly at a darting, white-tailed, flame-red fox.

"Hey, what the hell!"

"I'm gettin' the fever too, I guess," Pier said, reddening.

"Uh-huh."

The line moving over the land was like a rope tying up loose cotton. The white tails of animals thickened.

Another hour, and Pier and Red Joe found themselves a good hundred yards ahead of the line.

Pier uncocked his gun and, setting the stock down into the earth, leaned on the barrel end. The sharp edge of the barrel hole pushed through his blue-and-black mackinaw and into the muscle of his forearm.

He looked over the land. "Y'u know, this sure's funny country. Look how it bubbles up along the river there. Looks like a great big piece a risin' bread dough somebody's just walked through. An' out that way, east, why, Judas Priest, it's as flat as a schoolteacher's breast."

Without moving his body, Red Joe's eyes roved over the landscape. "It is funny. Wonder what it looked like when them Sioux Indians lived here?"

"Wal, Pa says it was like a sea, runnin'."

"Uh-huh." Red Joe spat out his old quid, took a fresh pinch from his tobacco pouch.

"It's hard to think that nobody lived here once. That now it's full a people, farmin'."

"You mean people scrabblin'."

"Wal, yeh." Pier filled and lighted his corncob pipe.

"Just look at that farm there. That poor bastard's no farmer atall. I tell you, man, it takes brains to farm."

"You tellin' me?" Pier looked to his right to make sure Âlde Romke was out of earshot. "That's why I kicked the old man off the place. He was smart in small ways. Like with cows. He could always get more out a cows than I could. But when it came to real git an' go on a big-time farmin' basis, fast-movin', why, he was as lost as an old woman tryin' to drive a car."

"Uh-huh."

Pier looked to the southwest. "Say, ain't that field still got corn in it?"

Red Joe looked. "By God, I think it has at that."

Pier watched for a movement of husks. "Sure. Them husks ain't stirrin' around. An' they would if they was empty. They hang stiff, like an udder full a milk."

"Sure enough."

"Some farmin', huh?" Pier puffed superiorly on his pipe.

"Yeh."

Pier mused on. "Funny country all right." He remembered something. "Did you know this country was once so full a blackbirds an' pigeons that the sky'd get dark in the middle of the day?"

"No!"

"It's true."

"For a man who can't read worth sour apples, you sure got a headful of ideas."

"Old Dreamer told me." Pier paused. "You know, he may be nuts about farmin' but he does know a lot about some things."

"I'll say. Why, I've even heard say he kin predict eclipses."

Pier nodded. "But his idees about farmin' . . . why, he was once tellin' me that the muddy Missouri was once a clean river, that our loose kind a farmin' has made it dirty. Mud washin' in it."

Red Joe laughed. "I heard 'im say that too. 'The Muddy Missouri. Too thick to drink, too thin to plow.' "

Pier grunted.

A shout went up from Alde Romke. It awoke them. The flying crescent had passed on. Otto Grimovich, on their left, was almost out of sight.

Sighing, and once more grabbing up their guns, they separated and moved cautiously down the field.

The plateau east of the Big Sioux breaks became more flat, the hole of the valley deeper. The men in the river bottom were hidden from sight. Only by the increasing number of animals darting like quick phantoms over the edge of the hill could Pier tell where the line was moving.

Guns roared east and west of the river. Pier wondered if the war in Europe, over now, thank God, had been like this, two lines of men moving toward each other, and both sides shooting wildly at anything that moved.

He had an urge. Without a word to Red Joe, he took off his mackinaw, unhooked his overall suspenders, and sat down in a whorl of brush and cornstalks, grunting. He felt safe here, hidden from the

sight of men. The wind rustled noisily in the stalks. A few husks scurried down the row. He squatted comfortably, enjoying it.

A gun blasted. BBs rattled around him. Hastily grabbing a handful of coarse corn leaves, he finished, and jumped up. "Hey, what the hell!"

Red Joe laughed. "Better hang yer cap on a stalk, mister, or some bastard's liable to give you a blast in the ass."

"Judas t'Priest. A man likes to have a little privacy, you know."

"Well, hell, droppin' out like that, without tellin' us, you leave a big hole in the line."

Pier glanced to his left. Again Otto was out of sight. Pier pulled on his mackinaw, grumbling.

The exposure in the clump of bushes had chilled him. He was glad he could run to catch up.

Red Joe said, kicking a dying, bloody jack rabbit out of the way, "The way them animals is jumpin' up, we'll be haulin' meat till hell won't have it."

Pier was trying to form a reply when men to either side shouted. Looking up, Pier saw that the flying crescent from the south had appeared.

Instantly the sky echoed with the thunder of shattering shotgun blasts. Jack rabbits fell everywhere. Some lay with their heads blown off, some were blown in half. Sometimes bunnies, their legs blasted from them in mid-air, bounced along on feet that weren't there, their brown, doelike eyes quivering and blinking. Off to one side, the legs of a prostrate cottontail jerked; the instinct to jump was the last life impulse to leave the shattered body.

A big jack bounded up at Pier's feet. Startled, Pier sprang aside. He lifted his gun, aimed, fired. Just as he pulled the trigger, the big jack made a mighty leap to one side, got away. It hopped crisscross over the strewn stalks and weeds.

Red Joe blasted. The jack, hit in mid-air, disintegrated.

Pheasants whirred up. One of them curved directly into Âlde Romke's stomach and knocked him flat. The old man's cap flew up and flipped over in the air.

A nervous gun to Âlde Romke's right blasted over the spot where the old man had just stood.

Âlde Romke's head popped up out of the weeds. "Ae! Wo'dammit!" He hopped around as if he had been hit.

"Hurt, Pa?"

"Ae, an' what else?"

"Are y'u?"

"Of course not. Go on. Get on with your hunt." Âlde Romke reached down, picked up the stunned pheasant and, with a flip of his wrist, snapped off its neck. He let it bleed a little and then hung it from his belt under his gray jacket. He shuffled on, hiding a smile in his white beard.

The ends of the two flying crescents met. The men closed in on the cornered animals. They drew the ten-mile circle together. Shots popped out wildly. BBs whizzed into the ground at Pier's feet, over his head, beside him, sometimes rattled against his clothes.

"Funny," Red Joe shouted, "funny we ain't seen no kiyotees yit."

"They're too smart," Pier yelled in return. "They run far ahead sneakin'."

The two blue lines of men moved over the yellow-gray land.

Dead animals lay everywhere. Soft white cottontails, heavy jack rabbits, slow-moving badgers, brilliant ring-necked pheasants. Blood stained clean white fur, fluffy pure feathers.

Ahead jumped up a wolf. Lean, gray-sleek, Pier watched it run dodging through the mass of scurrying rabbits. It snapped and growled at everything moving near it. Pier took careful aim and fired. The animal jumped as if someone had thrilled it with an arrow. It loped on, limping.

A quarter of an hour, and the big blue circle closed to eight miles; a half hour, to four. Every now and then the tan clothes of the professional hunter could be seen. Red-topped socks stirred low in the gray decay. The circle became tight-full of wild, terrorized creatures. Coyotes for the first time appeared.

Drips and puddles of blood spread everywhere. Cornstalks were drenched red. The earth seemed to be bleeding out of myriads of pores. Bits of torn flesh, scraps of live fur, burned powder, dust, corn smut, weed seeds flying in the air made it hard to breathe. Men cursed. Guns rumbled. Dogs barked and snapped, became confused with the mass of animals, were called back, were shot at. More guns thundered. Ejectors ejaculated empty shells, yellow and blue and red.

The blue circle became cramped. It narrowed to a mile. Men

walked side by side, tight, shooting, unloading. They slipped on blood-wet ground.

When the circle was but a half mile wide, the hunters walked jammed and doubled together. The center ahead lay in the hollow valley of a feeder stream to the Big Sioux. Some huntsmen had the advantage of the hills. Some shot up from the basin of the river bottom.

In the middle the animals jumped and tumbled together. Gutted carcasses dripped everywhere. In desperation, some jack rabbits jumped like huge grasshoppers fifteen feet into the air. Two wolves tore at each other with savage red teeth. Badgers and coyotes scrambled up the barren limbs of trees. When they were hit, they tumbled down in a long half-leaping fall.

Finally the last few animals staggered and fell. Some of the nimrods, still nervous, fired uselessly into the mass of throbbing flesh. Individual carcasses shuddered.

Pier was about to take one more shot, lining up the shiny, chicken-toe bead at the end of the barrel with the grooved eyesight near his nose, when his foot slipped in the carnage, queasily. He turned away, sick to his stomach. The smell of broken guts and trailing streams of dung was suddenly too much for him.

In a moment Red Joe and Blacktail, who had also come up, joined Pier.

Âlde Romke and Âlde Folkwâlda stood near, rubbing their old veined hands. The broken flesh seemed to bother them too.

A few trucks appeared. Men, gathering up hunks of jerked meat not blown to bits by BB shot, piled on, waving good-by.

A tired-eyed, limping stranger came up to Pier. "You Frixen?"

"Yeh."

"Depity Ain'it told me to tell you his truck broke down. But he said he'll be along in a couple of hours."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it." The stranger limped away, muttering to himself, "God damn them blisters anyway."

Pier looked up at the darkening sky, looked at his watch. "Judas Priest, it's five o'clock. I'll sure be late with the chores tonight."

Red Joe agreed. "So will I."

"Wal, c'mon then. I know it's a long ways walkin', but it's better'n standin' around waitin'."

"Soan, soan," Âlde Romke chided, still rubbing his hands, "you're surely going to take some of that meat home with you, ain't you?"

Pier's upper lip thinned. "If it wouldn't smell like crap, I would." He rubbed his sore nose lightly.

"Soan, I guess you ain't got true Frisian sporting blood in you."

"Huh," Pier grunted, "an' I thought I heard you make some remarks about using a shotgun."

"Ae." Âlde Romke waved his curved fingers at the bloody pile. "Of course, I don't believe in slaughterin' like this. It's against all reason. Even the Sioux knew better." He shook his head. "But, now that it's done, it's a waste to let all that meat lay there. Soan, don't aggravate the sin."

Pier shook his head.

Âlde Romke wagged his head from side to side. "All that meat. Âlde, what do you think, shall we take some home for our tables?"

"Sure." Âlde Folkwâlda nodded, buttoning up his old blue mackinaw against the chilling evening air.

"All right, when the truck comes, we'll take with us what we can." Âlde Romke still surveyed the pile. "You know, while we're waiting for Depity Ain'it, I got half a notion to roast us a rabbit right here. It'll give that little man in my stomach something to do. Besides, we should save all the meat we can. In the Old Country a whole city would eat for a week on all this meat. But here in this wild America, huh, we throw it away to the worms." Âlde Romke turned to Blacktail. "It ain't against the law to roast out in the open, is it?"

Blacktail's eyes flicked. "Oh no. Help yourself."

Âlde Romke turned to Red Joe. "An' what do you think?"

Red Joe rubbed his stomach. "Well, to tell you the truth, the little man that's in my stomach says it's tomorry already. He ain't et since breakfast."

Âlde Romke nodded. "See, Pier, reach in an' grab us a good one. An' don't act like you ain't hungry."

Pier stood hesitant, lifting his red brows. He felt he should go home, he couldn't let Nertha and the boy do the chores, she had already been acting a little off from all the work she did for him, and yet he was hungry too.

Âlde Folkwâlda, grunting, looking at him impatiently, leaned over and selected a choice jack.

"Boys, get me some firewood. We're going to save some of this terrible butchering after all," Âlde Romke exclaimed, taking off his jacket. Laying aside the beheaded pheasant he had been carrying, he grabbed the prime rabbit. His knife flashed once, twice, and the creature was skinned.

While Âlde Romke cleaned it, Red Joe and Pier built a quick fire with loose brush.

Strangers waiting for rides gathered around to watch. Âlde Romke hardly noticed them. Wonderingly they watched his ceremonious spitting.

More trucks appeared, their owl-red eyes glaring in the twilight.

The hare turned over the fire, browning, sizzling.

Âlde Romke looked at Pier, shook his head. "Soan, I'm disappointed in you. Fresh rabbit over an open fire, an' you, a Frisian, don't like it? An' that too, after a long day's walk? Man, how could you think of walking back without a bite to eat?"

"As I said, I got chores to do."

Red Joe said, "So have all of us."

Pier held still.

Âlde Romke sighed and turned to Âlde Folkwâlda. "The young men ain't what they used to be. Years ago our young men had sense. Sense."

Âlde Folkwâlda nodded, holding his lump-belly in his arms. He sat rocking on his heels before the fire. "Ae, them were the good days, all right."

"Ae." Âlde Romke cast brooding eyes around the circle of faces, settled them on Pier. "An', Pier, you a Frisian, an' you don't remember the story of Adel, how he was the first in history to start the wonderful custom of men sharing their kill together? How, after a hunt, he would prepare the guest meal of roasted meat, how, after everybody had eaten, he would make them kiss each other, even them that had bad blood between them?"

Pier shrugged. "I don't care to remember."

Âlde Romke shook his head, looked into the flickering firelight. His eyes closed a little, as if memories of an ancient time were stirring in his mind.

Âlde Folkwâlda, too, dreamed into the fire. He took off his shaggy cap and brushed an imaginary hair out of his eye. His bald dome gleamed red in the light.

"Too bad, too bad," Âlde Romke craked, "too bad." With one hand he pulled at his white beard, with the other slowly turned the hare over the crackling, orange-red flames.

The talk irritated Pier. He was anxious to be home.

A ruminant expression worked along Âlde Romke's lips. "Them were the days all right. People knew how to live then. How to eat. Why, in It Âlde Boek, it tells where they'd eat ham an' pickled meat an' smoked fatty flesh. An' fine tongue. Killing a pig, they'd serve up juicy pig's feet, pig's head, pig's back, bloody ribs, sausages, everything. Best of all would be a swan's drumstick. An' a duck in salt. An' then, ah, a drink of beer or mead out of a steer's horn to wash it all down."

"Hey," Red Joe growled, "cut it out. My mouth's waterin' already."

Pier watched Blacktail out of the corner of his eye, hardly listening to the chatter. He saw Blacktail's narrowed gray eyes flickering in the firelight, glancing cautiously from face to face, watching. The man said nothing. Sometimes his curt black mustache lifted a little, white teeth showing.

"Ae, many's the time good Frisians have held a feast like this. Just before they'd get ready to beat up on the Danes. Or the Wylde Wytsingen. Ae. They'd kill an ox an' roast it in a great fire. Mead an' malt would run. An' men would stoke each other up with great stories, with great boasts. An' when they had eaten themselves full of ox meat, an' drunk themselves dizzy with mead, the chief would wave a hand"—Âlde Romke demonstrated with a thin arm—"an' men would bring in on the cover of the feast pot the rope the ox had been tied up with. Up would jump the Frisian fighters, sword in hand. It was the signal to fight."

Âlde Folkwâlda exclaimed, "Frysk folk, lit de Wylde Wytsingen net oerwinne!"

"Ae." Âlde Romke surveyed the mass of dead animals again. "But nowadays, men blow up the poor animals with the inventions of the Devil. The sword an' the arrow have gone."

"Oh, Judas t'Priest, Pa, lay off that Old Country stuff," Pier growled. "I've told you an' told you that we're in Ameriky now."

Blacktail lifted a brow. "Can it be that the son of a seine slinger's turned patriot on us?"

Pier looked at him steadily. "One more remark like that, mister,

an' I'll ask one a my Big Sioux outlaw friends to let fly with a wild shot or two someday. Back there in the brush."

Blacktail said nothing.

"Devil's inventions," Âlde Romke murmured to himself, rocking on his heels. "Greate Pier was right when he said all honor had gone out of hunting an' fighting." Âlde Romke shook his head. "Ae, we've gotten so machine-smart that a child's finger on a trigger is the equal of a dozen men with swords. Ae, a sure sign that men have lost all reason. All sense. The sons a bitsies."

Blacktail stroked his tan, well-tailored hunting clothes. "Grampa, if you don't like the way we do things here in progressive America, why don't you go back where you came from?"

Âlde Romke grunted, and turned the dripping, roasting rabbit.

Pier burned inside. His eyes became white-blue in the firelight. With great effort he managed to control himself.

It was pitch-dark when Deputy Ain'it came for them.

· 3 ·

Snow had fallen. It was a bright blue day. Sunlight glinted on the white-flake diamonds. Only the sides of buildings, poles, trees, showed through the eight-inch fluff of golden snow.

Red Joe had come with his rotary saw to cut wood. The trees that Pier had cut a year ago in the river bottom and had piled neatly on the south side of the corncrib were ready to be sawed for stove fuel at last.

Together the two men set up the saw and Pier's five-horsepower engine. Despite the cold, the sun was warm upon their backs.

They were about to start up the engine when a bobsled came jingling over the east slope. It swept down the road. It slowed and turned into Pier's lane. Three people were standing in it.

"Judas Priest, in them thick clothes, I can't make out who it is," Pier mumbled.

Red Joe straightened up and shaded his eyes. "That's Otto Grimovich drivin'."

"Huh. So it is." He narrowed his eyes. "By cripes, I think that's Pa an' Ma with him. Sure, that's just who it is."

Red Joe said nothing. He returned to his sledge hammer, pummeling down the last stake into the frozen ground.

Pier stepped across the deep snow toward the house. The bobsled, with bangling bells and snorting horses, stopped at the house gate.

"Hi," Pier greeted. "Pa an' Ma. Otto. What brings you out on a cold day like this?"

Âlde Romke chortled inside his high-collared sheepskin. "We run out of food, soan."

Pier laughed. "Wal, ye're welcome to all we got. So, Ma, an' how are you?"

"Good, soan. An' Nertha?"

Pier glanced at the house. He saw Nertha's drawn, curious eyes at the window. Though he could not see her child-heavy body, he had a glimpse of it in his mind's eye. "Why, she's all right, considerin'."

"She feels good? Nothin's gone wrong yet?"

"Not a thing." Pier rubbed his nose. "Oh, she's been crabby. But nothin' more than usual."

"Ah." Ma Lysbeth raised her thick brows significantly.

"But she ain't been sick atall."

Ma Lysbeth nodded her crow-wise head. She stepped down off the back of the bobsled, with one hand tightly holding her gray shawl around her head and with the other her windbelly. "I thought so. I knew it. I had a feeling things weren't right this morning when I woke up, an' so I says to Romke, 'Pa, pack up an' we'll go see the children.' "

"But, Ma, she's all right, I tell you."

She took a couple of steps and then, from a bent stance, looked at him with shrewd pity, as if only she knew what a lifetime meant, that it was short, that he was a child to think that a heart might beat forever. She said, "Soan, this morning I felt it. Felt it in my old bones. Something was wrong. Something wrong was going to happen today."

"Poppycock."

She swept her eyes over the yard. "Ha. Cutting wood. Good. Just get busy with that an' I'll take care of everything in the house."

Pier stood wide-eyed at the way she had begun to boss him around again. "But, Ma . . ." He looked at Âlde Romke.

Âlde Romke shook his head and threw out his hands, laughing.

She stepped into the house.

Pier cleared his throat. "Wal, Otto, an' was your mother that bossy too?"

Otto said nothing. He fumbled the lines in his mittened hands.

Âlde Romke looked over the yard. "The wood saw, huh?" He shook his head. "What a day we picked to come. Them rotaries, they drive me crazy. Of all the machines the Devil invented, that's the worst. It has the teeth of the Âlde Han Himself. Brr."

Pier grinned. "It's mighty handy though."

"Pier, someday one of them machines will be the death of you yet."

Pier looked up at Otto again. "What do you think, Otto?"

Otto smiled, and shrugged. He had wrestled a hand into his overall and had come up with a handful of sunflower seeds. He began to chew and spit.

"Otto, by cripes, it's never too cold for that stuff, is it? You know what I ought to do? I ought to pasture you out in my cornfield some summer. That'd be one way of gettin' rid of that pesky weed."

The grin on Otto's face widened into a scimitar. He slapped his hands together a little and huddled beneath his creamy sheepskin collar.

"Why don't you chew tobacco?"

"That's a sin against the flesh."

Pier shrugged. "That's what the wife says too."

Otto raised his lip. "Sss-piteh." He sniffed. "Well, I guess I better be gettin' on. Got to do some chorin' yet." And without further word, Otto started up his team of horses.

Pier watched the bobsled turn in the yard, listened to it crunch in the snow, then glanced at Âlde Romke. "Are you comin' with me, or goin' in the house?"

"Sonny in the house?"

"Oh no. He's t'school."

"Well, I'll go in the house anyway. I need to warm up." Âlde Romke shivered inside his sheepskin. "Brr. It friest."

"Okay. An' while ye're in there, why don't you make yerself a cup of boerekofje? That'll warm you up."

"Ae! Now you've said something." Âlde Romke hobbled toward the house. Pier, noticing that the old man's feet didn't track well, suddenly realized that his father didn't have many days left to live on earth.

Pier blinked, pushed the somber thought out of his mind. He went back to the saw. He found Red Joe waiting. "Wal, guess we're ready then, huh?"

"Right."

"I'll start up the old boy, an' then we'll roll."

Red Joe nodded.

Pier set the gas lever, opened the escape valve on the compression chamber, hooked the crank onto the drive shaft, and, cupping his hand over the carburetor to prime for gasoline, slowly started up the ponderous flywheels. There was a cough, a sputter, a whamming explosion. Then, picking up its own power, the heavy sneezing engine began to beat a drumming pound on the air. *Whee-ist boom! Whee-ist boom! Whee-ist boom!* Pier waited until the governor took hold before he shut off the escape valve. Then he went around to shove in the pulley clutch. The belt began to move. It slid swiftly. The three-foot circular saw started to whine. Its sharp two-inch teeth glittered diabolically in the sunlight.

Pier pointed to a slender willow log and the two men threw it up on the carriage. They leaned on the log and pushed it evenly into the saw. The saw's teeth spat bark, took hold. There was a spanging whing. The whine of the saw coarsened to a groan. The engine grunted. Then a severed piece, its edge fresh and creamy, fell off the carriage.

Pier worked methodically, wordlessly. With Red Joe he lifted log after heavy log onto the carriage, shoved them through. It was push and hold, pull back, and shift for a new grip. The saw whined and groaned and spat bark and dust. Willow and maple incense rose from the sawdust at their feet. In the white snow the sawdust was a solid gold.

The old saw frame shimmied. It jumped. Sometimes a heavy log almost buckled it. The carriage vibrated.

After a while, Pier began to wonder if the carriage wasn't too loose. If the blade were wedged too much it could break off and go hurtling across the yard. Instinctively he looked up to see if there was a stray horse or cow around, standing in the path of the blade's possible flight. He tried to quiet his fear with the thought that both he and Red Joe were careful men. Besides, only a fool would stand in front of the saw.

The old engine shook on its frame. Powerfully it drove the gleam-

ing, whirling saw blade through the box-elder and ash and maple boles. Once Pier and Red Joe picked up a cottonwood branch. Its tough fibers almost choked the singing saw. Its ringing lyric sank to a bass growl.

An hour later, just as they were lifting another cottonwood bole on the carriage, Pier happened to look up to see Âlde Romke come out of the house. Dressed to the crown of his head in sheepskin, the old man waddled through the deep snow like an overgrown baby in diapers and shawl. Pier waved to him, smiled, bent to his work again.

Âlde Romke came up close. He stood directly in the path of the saw. He shouted.

Pier looked up; started. He waved to the old man to get out of the way.

Again the old man shouted something.

Pier leaned forward, trying to understand. He watched the movements of the old man's flabbing mouth, the tithering of his pink tongue between his red gums, wondering what the words were. He cocked his head to one side and shrugged. Then again he tried to wave the old man to one side. He pointed to the roaring saw.

Âlde Romke didn't catch on. The old man pulled at his white, arrow-sharp beard with a mittened hand. Then, pointing to the house and lifting an imaginary cup, he indicated the forenoon coffee was ready.

Pier nodded. He nudged Red Joe.

Red Joe flicked an eye to show that he understood too.

Pier waved at the old man once more, hoping to chase him to one side. The motion jostled the cottonwood. It wedged the saw. Instantly the saw blade shrieked. Agonized steel screamed. There was a splitting crackle as if lightning had struck without sounding. *Whung-whoosh.* Before Pier's eyes, Âlde Romke seemed to open up in halves. A line of clear sky suddenly appeared between the old man's eyes, and in his red gums and white beard. The two halves opened pink and toppled apart. An instant later the severed halves poured crimson. The slaughtered body fell backward in the snow. Beyond, across the yard, Pier heard a thud in the straw pile; a hole had opened in its smooth, wind-blown top.

Pier felt Red Joe stiffen beside him. In a gray stupor, Pier glanced

at the split, fallen body, at the straw pile across the yard. Numbly his mind reached forward a trembling hand. It tried to understand that the cottonwood had wedged the saw, had bent it, had broken it; that a flaming cleaver had sliced through Âlde Romke, had flown on, had hit the straw pile.

Then Pier jumped. He threw his body at the belt to stop the saw, to keep more pieces from breaking off. The belt fought back. Pier lunged against it again. It gave way. It flipped off the pulleys, snapping. It snarled. It leaped like a frenzied python. Gigantically it snaked up against the woodpile and snapped out of sight around the corner of the corncrib.

Pier picked himself up. He sprang toward Âlde Romke. He stumbled. He knelt. Vaguely he heard Red Joe come running up beside him.

The engine, suddenly released from its load, began to gallop madly on its frame.

· 4 ·

For two weeks after the funeral, except for the routine of choring, Pier sat in a stupor by the kitchen stove. With his chair tipped back on two legs, with his hand over his slowly healing nose, he stared out of the window and sucked an empty pipe. When Nertha brushed past him to fill the stove with wood, he did not stir. When Teo came home from school with chatter about some new treasure found, he did not listen.

But at last, imperceptibly, like a stream of water that clears itself after a stone has disturbed it, the old momentum took hold of him again. Though dulled inside, gray, he once more went through the motions, in the shadowy days of winter, of preparing for next year's summer.

It was the evening of the twenty-seventh of December, the old Frisian fire-offering day. Pier sat warming himself by the cookstove, his armchair tipped back on two legs; Teo lay reading on the floor; Shep lay under the stove, his tail wagging like a slow fern in the wind; and Nertha, bulging with child, sat darning clothes on the other side of the table. Above them, the flame in the pulldown kerosene lamp convulsed irregularly. A bitter wind outside sucked at the window.

The clock on the mantel over the sink clicked loudly. Occasionally there was a yawning sound in its works.

Teo looked up from his big red book of mythology. His blue-green eyes were puzzled. "Say, Pop, why ain't we got a telephone like Jimmy's pop is got?"

"I dunno."

"But why ain't we?"

"It costs too much, I guess."

"How much?"

"I don't know." Pier discovered he had been musing over an empty pipe, and he filled it and lighted it.

"'Bout five dollars, Pop?"

"Oh, it'd be more than that."

"When will we get the money to get it, Pop?"

"When our ship comes in."

"Well, then why don't we try a co-op telephone then? Jerry Brandt says it don't hardly cost nothin' compared to them city ones."

Pier felt a smile working at his lips and for a moment he let it have its way. "Aw, Sonny, you don't know what ye're talkin' about."

"But Jerry said so. His Pop's got one, an' it don't hardly cost nothin'."

"Shecks, Sonny, don't talk to me about co-ops. They're a gyp like everything else."

"Jerry says that everybody shares the profits. Everybody."

Pier smiled bitterly. "Everybody shares, yeh. Everybody shares givin' one guy all the dough."

"Oh." Teo blinked.

"Yeh. Just ask yer ma if you don't believe me."

Nertha said nothing. She was looking to one side, an odd grimace working her face.

"Pop, how much does it cost to buy a phonygraph?"

"A phonygraph?"

"Yeh. Jimmy says he's heard one. Says there's one downtown now. Says it's a wonder. Says it's got bands playin' an' niggers singin'. Like—

"Ol' Pete Green, he come to town
To kiss the girls for miles aroun'.

An' jokes."

"Uh-huh. Wal, son, that's one a them newfangled machines they got out now. An', I dunno, I think maybe I've had enough of machines for a while. At least new ones."

"You should!" Nertha said suddenly.

Pier started. Again he noticed the odd twisting smile on her lips.

Teo said, "Aw, but, Pop, a phonygraph's a wunnerful thing. Wunnerful."

Pier's eyes dropped. He could not forget what one of those wonderful machines had done to his father. He remembered the crimson on the snow. Instantly the words of the old religious saw rose to his mind:

Wash me in the blood of the lamb,
Wash me whiter than the snow;
Wash me, make me pure within,
Cleanse, O cleanse me from my sin.

Pier bit on his pipestem. "No, son, no. We got too many machines already. Too many."

"Don't you feel very good tonight, Pop?"

"No, Sonny."

"Shall I read to you again, Pop?"

"No, boy, no." Pier puffed on his corncob pipe a moment. "Look, Sonny, just don't say nothin'. Just keep still a little." Pier glanced at Nertha, once more expecting her to pounce on him.

But she said nothing. A somber expression had settled over her stony face. She had shrunk inward again. Her numb hands clumsed with the mending of Teo's overall, a faded gray one. Every now and then she mechanically stroked it.

Pier went back to his musing.

It dawned on him that someone, this time Teo, had offered to read to him, had offered to reveal the hidden in print to him. He reflected. Why, the last time anybody had offered to read to him . . . why, it was shortly after Teo was born.

He missed the reading. Those lazying Sunday afternoons, lying on the horsehair sofa, listening to Nertha's voice, then pleasant with love and care, cajoling his ears with strange words from the mysterious world of letters, those were great times.

Pier coughed. He wished he had not said "No."

Teo looked up again. "Pop, I really got an awful good story here."

"You have, huh?"

Teo's blue-green eyes brightened at the friendly sound in Pier's voice. The boy rose to his feet and sidled up to Pier. "Really, Pop. An' tonight I ain't too tired to read to you." The boy placed the big red book on Pier's lap. "Here. You hold it."

Pier cleared his throat. He knew that, for all her apathy, Nertha was inwardly watching him. He felt that before he could accept the boy's second offer he should at least make one more gesture of protest for pride's sake. He asked, "Is this a book that's about farmin'?"

Teo drew back a little. Like a small puppy's, his eyes filled with anxious questioning. "Well, no, it's about——"

Without looking up from her work, Nertha cut in. "Leave your pa alone, Teo. He don't care to learn nuthin' anyway."

Pier dropped his chair to the floor on all four legs. "Huh?"

"He's too dumb to listen. So leave him alone."

Pier glared at her. With great effort he managed to push down an impulse to snap something mean.

Teo hesitated. "Maybe I better go to bed."

"A good idea," she said, nodding her head vigorously. "I'll go light up the lamp for you while you take off your clothes." She laid aside the overall she was patching and stood up. She got a match from the box hanging over the stove, reached for a small night lamp in the cabinet under the chimney, and lighted it. Its uncertain, orange flame brightened the kitchen a little. "Come, boy, I'll help y'u with your clothes." She reached for his suspender.

Teo slipped from her reach.

"Teo. Oh, why do you always run when I touch you?"

"I dunno."

"Why?"

Teo said nothing. He looked at his feet, his lower lip thickening.

"C'mere." She tried to help him again.

Once more he ducked from her reach, and this time ran for the stair door. He opened it and started upstairs, carrying his red book, his feet pattering swiftly.

"Here!" Nertha cried. She ran to the stair door after him, shouting, "Here. Don't you want to undress warm by the stove?"

"No." Pier could hardly hear the boy's voice.

"Well, but don't you want yer lamp?"

"No. There's one up here already." A door slammed.

Nertha stood tensely, waiting. The skin over the roots of her neck shone white.

"Aw, woman," Pier said, filling his pipe again, stuffing the tobacco into the bowl with a hard forefinger, "aw, let the kid alone."

Sighing, setting the lamp on the table, and sinking heavily into her chair, she wailed, "Oh, I don't know what's got into that boy of mine. Somebody's poisoned his mind against me."

"Horse collar."

She wailed on as if she hadn't heard him. "I work. I slave. I sweat. All for him. I almost kill myself for him. But what reward do I get? Nuthin'. Nuthin'. No heart. No kiss. No love at all. Oh, sometimes I wonder if there's a God in heaven after all. I'm almost sure that Satan's taken creation away from our Father, an' is running the world to ruin. Almost."

"Wal, now, no need to run at the mouth, woman."

She said, as if she saw far within her being a conclusive proof of it, "Yes. That's right. There's positively no use. No use."

Pier turned on his chair to face her. "Land alive, woman. Don't get so excited. The kid didn't mean no harm."

She sighed loudly.

Pier pointed a self-righteous finger. "So y'u think you got it bad, huh? Wal, let me tell you somethin', woman. Do y'u think I enjoyed seeing the old man go the way he did?" He paused, trying to keep himself within bounds. "Woman, sometimes you make me mad. Here y'u are. Got a warm home. Got plenty to eat. Got plenty a clothes. Got money to get what you want. Got a man who works from sunrise to sunset to keep you in all the things you need. An' yit, here y'u are, dragging around in his house like somebody's hexed you. Just what do you want, woman?"

She looked up with dull eyes, seeming to notice him for the first time. "What?"

Pier swallowed. "What do you want?"

"Nuthin'."

Pier stood up and stepped up to her and towered over her. "Speak up. This is yer chance. What do you want?"

"You wouldn't know anyway."

"Oh no?"

Nertha dropped her eyes again. "No. Never."

Pier paced around her, biting his teeth, clenching his fist, swear-

ing that he would not let himself go. "Woman, goddammit, I . . ." His eyes happened to catch sight of her protuberant belly. He remembered his coming son. He bit his teeth again. He raised his fist, held it, let it fall. He turned, and, grabbing up his cap and winter jacket, stepped outdoors.

It was when he was striding aimlessly through the snow in the black vacant world of the night that he remembered he still had not fed the cows an extra helping of hay and the birds a forkful of nesting.

He turned and went back to the house for a lantern. He hurried to do it.

· 5 ·

Pier drove Queen and Daise around the corner of the woodshed. He saw Teo come running out of the barn.

The boy yelped and skipped toward him. "Pop! Pop! Got some candy, Pop?" As he ran, the boy's small sheepskin opened. His blue-black stocking cap hung askew.

Pier restrained an impulse to smile. He stopped the horses. "Whoa, whoa. Hello, Sonny."

"Got some candy, Pop?"

"Nope, not today, Sonny."

"Aw, I bet you have." Teo clambered up on a runner. His cheeks were rosy. They gleamed. The little fellow threw a child leg over the top of the bobsled and slipped down to the straw on the floor. Then he stiffened. His eyes became wide and round. "Hey! You got a phonygraph."

"Aw, what're you talkin' about," Pier scoffed.

"A phonygraph. With bands an' jokes."

Pier beamed. He glanced nervously at the house, worried that Nertha might not like it. When he saw her white face glowing up behind the north kitchen window, he suddenly pretended to be very busy with the job of hooking the lines over the edge of the bobsled.

"Boy oh boy. Our ship's come in. Kin we play it right away, Pop?"

"Wal, we should do the chores first."

"Aw, but we can play a little, can't we?"

"Maybe. We'll see. I tell you what. Let's first unhitch, shall we?"

"Okay, Pop."

When they had stalled and fed the bay trotters, Pier walked back to the bobsled with Teo skipping in circles around him.

Pier opened the endgate and stepped into the bobsled. He took a deep breath, clamped his arms around the heavy mahogany phonograph, and lifted it from the straw-colored floor.

Teo scuffled under Pier's feet, eager to help. "Kin I carry the other box, huh, Pop? What's in it, huh, Pop?"

"Hey," Pier grunted, "set it down. That's records. Music."

"Oh." The boy stepped back. "I ain't doin' nothin', Pop."

"Okay. Go open the doors fer me."

Puffing, grunting, stamping, Pier carried the machine into the kitchen. He set it down carefully near the table.

Teo jumped around it, dropping curdles of snow and yard dirt on the floor.

"Oh, my God, what now?" Nertha wailed. "An', boy, yer overshoes! Ain't I learned y'u no manners yit? Get them overshoes off." She sighed. "Look at that floor. An' all day I've been cleanin' house, breakin' my back to keep a nice home for y'u, waxin' an' polishin', an' here you tramp it dirty in a second."

The beaming smile on Pier's face faded. The harangue had been meant for him. "Now, now, take it easy, woman. This is a special day."

"A special dirt-work day fer me, you mean." She stared at the floor. "Just look at that. Dirt. Mud. Manure. Both a you." She sank in a chair. "Work, work, work." She shook her head and held her brow.

"Oh, horse collar, a little dirt ain't gonna hurt nobody."

Teo asked hesitantly as he unbuckled his boots, "Mom, ain't you glad we got a phonygraph?"

"A phonograph? So that's what it is this time."

Pier coughed. "Wal, I might as well tell you right out. This ain't all I bought."

"I suppose not. I suppose you bought a pipe organ, too. A church organ to put them cows a yers to sleep."

Pier brushed the biting words aside. "Nope. I bought a two-row cultivator. First one in the county."

"Lord God in heaven!"

Teo's eyes rolled open. "A two-row?"

Nertha covered her face again. "An' as poor as we are, you had to do that?"

"Wal, woman, we needed it."

"I suppose the next thing you'll buy the boy a motorcycle?"

"Wal, woman, that's an idee. Can't let a little thing like a bad saw throw us. A man ain't got no git an' go if he does. Besides, woman, the kid's crazy about machines. He knows more about them than all of us put together. Can't let that go to waste."

"Oh no. Oh no. What you want is to kill him," she hissed.

"Judas t'Priest, don't act nuts."

"Kill him. Sure."

Teo threw himself in a chair. "Oh, I wish some people wouldn't always fight so. I wanna hear the phonygraph."

Pier collected himself. "Aw, Nertha, you're upset. Take it easy. You've been workin' too hard. You've been lookin' at the down side a things too long." He took a deep breath and slipped off his mittens and mackinaw. "I tell you why I bought that phonygraph. I bought it to get some music in the house. Brighten you up with some music."

"Me? When I'm sick a hearin' you play yer accordeen?"

"Besides, this music is good. It's by real perfessional men. Sousa an' so. Experts."

Pier opened the machine and puzzledly looked into its works. "Let's see now. The feller said I was to . . . yeh." He remembered the other box in the bobsled and, without putting on a coat, ran out to get it. He was back in a moment. This time, when he came in, he kicked off his boots. He ripped open the wooden box. He lifted a disk and put it carefully on the turntable. His calluses squinched on the pin-thin grooves. He flipped a nickel lever. The turntable began to revolve. He gently lifted the head and needle, set it carefully down on the disk.

There were words, laughter.

"*Well, Judge*," one voice said, "*I tell you. I struck him on the impulse of the moment.*"

"*That's a darn lie, Judge*," another voice retorted, "*he struck me right square on the jaw.*"

Pier rolled on his chair, his light blue eyes wide, his red hair wild.

When the record was finished, he tried another. Teo read the title for him: *The Countess Maritza*. Instantly the room was filled with

operetta music. A golden voice, a woman's voice, lifted in the gray, country kitchen.

"Dance, gypsy, play, gypsy,
Sing while you may."

Pier's eyes teared. Triumphantly he looked at Nertha. "See," he said.

Nertha said nothing. The vindictive light in her eyes retreated. She looked at Teo and glanced to one side.

Pier let his tongue run on. "An' the best part of it is, it's got a diamond point. We'll be long in the grave before that wears out."

Teo sat enthralled. Pier could see a door opening in the lad's eyes and wonder walking in.

The tune lifted. Gay and light, like a swift dancer, it swirled in the winter-fast house.

The music awoke memories in Pier. It stirred up a longing for another time. He thought of the Nertha he had known long ago. He saw again her soft green eyes, her silver hair, its gentle coils.

He glanced at the Nertha sitting now by the stove. And felt sick inside.

His mind ran away. He thought of Kaia. He saw her dancing to the music. The violins had stirred her gypsy blood. She was begging him to come to bed with her. There was kermis in the air.

His thighs ached for the dark-haired beauty. He toyed with the idea of seeing her after dark. He could easily slip away under the pretext of doing some chores in the barn. It would be a joy. Ae.

And it would be a wrong, too. A son was coming to his house. He could not dishonor it with adultery. The man who left the side of a woman heavy with his child was a devil. A devil. Ae.

He glanced at Nertha. He was surprised to find that she was looking directly at him. The look in her eyes was so stony-hard that he jerked up with guilt. My God! Had she read his mind?

He braved a look again. And this time saw that, though her eyes were fixed on him, she was not seeing him. She reminded Pier of a mare gone loco-mad. He began to wonder if she had lost her mind. Pregnant women were known to have done so. Ae.

He caught himself. What was that? Why, he had picked up the old man's expression, his nodding "Ae." He had truly and at last

taken the old man's place. He was truly and at last the patriarch, the king, of the Frixens.

. 6 .

Nertha herself wondered if she were going mad. A door was opening in her mind. And though she fought to keep it tight shut, it opened anyway. She saw red snakes. They wriggled and hissed and rose against her. They were fleshy snakes, as long as carrots, and they looked directly at her thigh. Each had an eye and the eye was filled with carnal lust.

The evil sight almost blinded her. She lowered her head in shame.

The music stopped. The needle clicked on the record. And instantly the snakes stiffened and the door closed. She jumped up. "Now. That's enough music for today. Git to yer chorin', Pier."

Pier shut off the machine, and sighed. "That's right. Chorin'. Wal, Sonny, come, let's get it over with."

"But we kin play it after supper?" the boy asked.

"Sure. Sure. Come, let's pail them cows, boy."

"Okay, Pop."

Nertha said, feeling a numbness in her mind, "Teo, did you get your cobs and wood yit? An' coal for the hard-coal burner?"

"Yip. It's all on the porch."

"Oh." She paused. "Well, maybe you kin help me in the house a little then."

Pier's eyes opened. She felt them on her. "Help you?" Pier asked. "What's got into you, woman? He always helps me chore."

"But I got some work for him."

"Like what?"

"Oh . . . get some fruit and meat out of the cellar."

"Can't you get them?"

"Sure, but . . ." She rubbed her belly. She saw Pier's eyes on her hand.

Pier's voice was curt. "Do y'u good to go down there. The more you keep movin', the easier it'll come."

Enraged, she jumped at him. "Do you always have to talk like that in front of him?"

"Sure. What's wrong with it? He sees it happenin' to the cows, don't he?"

"Oh, Lord God," she cried, "this man is depraved."

Pier's laugh was derisive.

Nertha leaned against the chair. She stroked the apron over her thigh. With eyes clouded in bitterness, she saw the boy put on his sheepskin, his overshoes, saw him look longingly at the phonograph. She caught a breath and took a grip on herself. "Pier, take that machine out of here."

"Where do you want it?"

"Want it? I don't want it. Throw it outdoors for all of me."

"Wal, now. Ain't that bein' a little careless with my hard-earned money?"

"Och!"

"Wal, ain'it?"

She took another tight hold on herself and said nothing.

"Shall I put it in the livin' room? There behind the table by the hard-coal burner?"

"I don't care." She could feel his eyes prying into her. She drew herself up close.

Pier shrugged. "Okay, woman. I'll put it in the dinin' room behind the burner." Pier carried it, grunting, stamping, into the other room.

Pier had put on his boots and was about to step out of the door, when she thought of something. "An' how did you say we're gonna pay for that thing?"

"I didn't say."

"Oh. Well, an' how are we gonna pay for it?"

"By savin'."

"Huh. At whose expense?"

"Oh, we'll cut a little here, a little there."

"An' cheat the boy out of clothes too?"

"No, the boy will get as much as he always got."

She winced when she saw Pier put his hand on the boy's shoulder. She fired when she saw Teo accept the gesture. She said, "I suppose you'll grind the corn for our johnnycake and corn mush too? Like you do for the cattle?"

"Lady, you give me an idee."

She nodded. "Yes, an' I suppose you'll make me go back to molding candles from cow fat?"

"Maybe."

"An' make me pick weed leaves fer tea? Like yer mother did?"

Pier said nothing.

"An' make me pick my own herbs instead of gettin' a doctor?"

Pier patted Teo's shoulder. "Them herbs Ma Lysbeth picked did more good for my colds and flus and grippes than all the pills Dr. Helder ever give me." Pier paused. "Besides, didn't you use to hunt the woods for them yerself?"

A door opened again, this time a good door. She saw herself, a young girl, gay, slim, laughing at Dad Roel in the doorway, telling him she would be back in time for supper. She was only going to the woods north of Devil's Gulch. She was going to gather flowers; and, if she happened to see any, pick some herbs, a few simples. She could smell the day. The grass was running before her feet. The trees were blowing. A film of silver clouds was moving across the sun. The wind from the gulch was stroking her legs and stealing like a bold lover beneath her dress, embarrassing her. She ran on. Only twelve, and not yet afflicted with the curse, that source of all evil, she was having her moment. All things were pure and sweet, with no evil in sight at all. She was having heaven on earth. Twelve, and no sin at all. Two curls of silver, one over each shoulder. Pure and sweet. Freckled. She ran down a low hill, leaped over a gully in a field, climbed another low hill. The gulch was far behind. Daisies and wild persimmons bloomed everywhere. Purple pasqueflowers were tangled in the fresh green grass of spring. She kneeled. She touched their delicate petals, so soft that a finger tip drew dew from their succulence. The petals were sweet whispers. She worshiped, green eyes brimming. Perfume rose. She swooned. She dreamed of the unnamable. Sweet twelve. Pure.

She snapped her eyes open. Someone had been talking. "What?"

"We'll be goin' now," Pier was saying. He drew Teo with him.

"Oh . . ." She reached out a hand for the boy.

But the door closed and he was gone. Sweet boy. Pure. Clean pearl skin. She heard him walking off the porch with his father, heard him patter down the path in the snow toward the barn. Weakly she closed her eyes and held her heavy belly in her hands. She sat down by the table.

When she thought about the coming child, bitterness returned to her. Pier was sure to grab the new son from under her fingers, make him a slave, put him on machines.

Oh! The man was mad to be buying the boy such terrible instruments of death. A two-row cultivator. A machine twice as sure to kill. That man. What a bitterness he was to her. What a devil.

Fiercely she hoped the second child would turn out to be a girl. And if it did, she would teach it to hate her father, to hate all men. She would keep it sweet and pure, would teach it never to grow older than twelve.

How brutal, how blunt, how clumsy Pier was. Ah, she would show the girl all these things about him. Show her that he was heading straight for hell.

Nertha nodded vindictively. The way the man rushed around, he had a date with God.

If only he would die. If only he would die. Ah. How simple life would suddenly become.

She would never regret him. Never. Not one whit of him. Not one jot. He had never given her joy. Never. With all her soul she wished she had never submitted herself to him.

She remembered how it had been. She sighed. At first, it had been fun. There was something nice and naughty about doing the forbidden. There was something wonderful about being alone to do it. There was something glorious about the shivers of anticipation that ran the length of her limbs after he had entered her. A joy was coming.

And she remembered how at last she had tired of it. Always it started good, but never it got anywhere. Like an unfinished story, it did not shut the door to something. It just went on and on, became a straining that never ended, and finally one tired.

Once she remembered that a door seemed to be closing. There had been a soaring in her. She had dreamt she was riding a flying swan, of rising in the sky. She had closed her eyes. But just as the swan was flying at its highest, near heaven itself, the dream had burst. And she opened her eyes to find a man grunting upon her, Pier, and frothing and moaning upon her cheek. And then the man had quieted, had drawn away as if he were ashamed of something. And last, even before she could rearrange her nightgown, he had fallen asleep beside her.

That had been once. Otherwise it had been a duty, a sad fulfilling of a promise made at marriage.

She murmured to herself, "Oh, God, why are you torturing me

with this man? I am only a humble child of Thine and all I want is a little happiness, not this bull-horror man from hell."

She sighed again. Yes, there was no doubt of it. She and Pier were through as man and wife. Love had vanished. Her soul did not warm to the touch of his hand any more. Worse, when he did touch her, the few violets she had wilted in her heart.

How she hated him. She shook her head. How she hated him. She hated him with all her blood. He was a monster, breaking her and stealing the milk of life from her, her boy Teo. And now, even before her second boy was born, he was already casting hungry eyes upon it.

She wished she could rid herself of it. She wondered if she still had some white cedar left. Kaia had once brought some, crushed bark and twigs, telling her that if she didn't want babies to use it. Nertha remembered she had taken the packet gingerly, had looked at it with drawn-up brows, had put it away in the pantry. The herb, Kaia said, would throw her into convulsions.

It was terrible to think of killing a life already begun. Revolting. But it was also terrible to think that this devil she was living with was going to mutilate her child with his machines. She groaned. It wasn't enough that he had killed poor Âlde Romke with a Satan machine. He had to put his sons on the altar too.

She stood up. Her head ached. Her brains felt like a mass of bread dough. Somebody, something, had thrust a horny hand into it. The hand was pulling up a piece of it, tearing it apart, like a crazy baker at work.

She shook herself. She lighted the pulldown lamp. The dull yellow flame flutted a little. She went to the stove. She took a frying pan out of the top of the stove and pushed it over the hot part. She leaned over and filled the stove with cobs. They had been gathered in the hog yard. A dried piece of pig dirt fell from her fingers. She shivered. She went to the sink and scrubbed her hands vigorously with soap and water. She stepped back to the stove and dropped a dab of fat into the warming pan. It began to melt.

To get the last drop of gray, queasy fat off the spoon, she hit the side of the pan. A glob of it arched through the air, fell on the blue-gray linoleum at her feet.

She went to the pantry and got a bowl of cold, boiled potatoes.

leftovers from the noon meal. She began to slice them. They fell flipping into the pan. The fat and the slices began to sizzle.

She went to the cellar and got a jar of meat and a jar of beans. She put them in pans and warmed them up too. The stove hummed with rising warmth.

She sat down, tired. She puffed. She held her stomach.

She remembered the overall the boy had torn on the way home from school. She sighed. She stood up and got the sewing basket and overall. She looked at the shredded garment. Such a boy. What could he have gotten into to have torn his pants so?

The rent was too large to be sewn by hand. She went to the living room. She lighted a small hand lamp. In a corner stood her sewing machine. She rolled it out, opened the hood. The sewing head came up, clicked into place.

Whiffs of blossom scent from the flowers in the bay window came to her. The red geraniums smelled like crushed raw earth. She smelled deeply. It was a pure and heavenly smell. Angels. The pure in heart.

She suddenly remembered something. Had she wanted to, she could have married Domeny Beckstrom. He would have saved her from this. He would have been a sweet good husband too. He had touched her once, and the touch had reminded her of her mother's, just before she died. She wondered why she had ever thought the domeny objectionable, why she had ever preferred Pier's horny hand.

She recalled how one Sunday Domeny Beckstrom had preached on the unpardonable sin. She recalled how she had worried for weeks for fear she might have committed it. She laughed now, thinking about it. Since that sweet day, she had no doubt committed it a thousand times. Yes, she nodded to herself, yes, no doubt. Doomed.

She was about to sit down when a crackling, sizzling noise awakened her. The potatoes. They were burning. She ran to the stove, turned the fried, black-brown crusts over with a spatula, set them on the back of the stove. She looked quickly at the beans and the sausages, set them on the back of the stove too. Tea she could make later, at the last moment, before the men sat down.

She returned to the sewing machine. She fumbled with the overall. She smelled it. She sat down slowly.

The unpardonable sin. The Holy Ghost entered the heart, and the mind ignored it. The heathen knew no better and couldn't sin it.

But she did. She had it in her heart and her mind was denying it. Long ago the Holy Ghost had told her that she was sinning in living with Pier. Their life together was false. It was a lie. The Holy Ghost said so. Yet they continued to put up a pious front to the world.

Another thought came to her. There was something wrong, though, in admitting dark sin, in painting oneself black before one could think of salvation. It was like smearing oneself with mud to make sure one was dirty enough to be washed. To be cleansed in the blood of the lamb. Oh! It was all confusion. She shook her head.

Or maybe it was the sin of hoping that a man could be kind when he possessed her, of hoping that fun would lead to joy, when all along God hadn't intended that a woman should enjoy it. Maybe. Could be.

She flushed with guilt. That sin she had sinned too.

She smelled the overall again. The boy was still in it. She loved the child smells in his clothes. They were dear smells. She recalled that Teo had smelled just this way a few moments after birth.

She adjusted the sewing lever on the head. She pushed the blue-gray fabric beneath the needle. She flipped down the lever, brushed out the cloth smoothly and, with easy rising and falling strokes of her foot, started up the treadmill. Her feet worked rhythmically. The needle jitted into the cloth with a steady pittering sound.

Blood began to well up from the seam under her fingers. She brushed it off. But again it welled up. She rubbed her eyes. She drew the cloth around a little to avoid the boy's flesh. But yet the blood came.

Then she screamed. Blood flowing from clothes? My God, she had been hexed then! My God! My God! Frantically she jerked the overall out of the machine, pulled it into her lap. At once the blood vanished.

She stared at her lap, her nostrils flared white, her eyes pale gray-green.

It could not be. It could not be. Teo? Firstling? Bleeding here beneath her fingers? He who had opened her womb? Sweet and precious? Her eyes became pools of mad purple.

She jumped shrilling from her chair. She sprang to the kitchen door, running clumsily. She opened it and ran toward the barn. "Teo! Teo!" She felt her mind burn, saw it turning to smoke, shriveling up.

Her mind blackened. It snarled with lightning. Before her on the nightfall-darkened yard Teo was walking, cheeks rosy, smiles on sweet young lips.

"Teo, Teo, are you sure you're there?"

The little fellow dropped the armful of wood he was carrying to the water-tank heater. Hesitantly he started toward her. "What's the matter, Mom?"

"Oh . . . Then it wasn't . . . Oh . . ." Crying, she wrung her hands. Wiped her brow.

"What's the matter, Mom?"

"Oh . . ." A great sigh gushed from her.

"Mom, you ain't got yer coat on. You'll catch cold."

She was numb. She nodded. She backed toward the house. Her eyes glittered in the deep dusk.

She entered the house. The light from the lamp was a shivering yellow. She stared at the overall she had dropped on the floor. It could not be. She picked it up and smelled again. It could not be.

She thrust it under the nose of the machine, into its mouth, into the nickel-shining teeth.

Her foot worked the treadle. The needle jitted. The cloth moved forward. Blood flowed again.

She leaned back and hid her face in her hands. She whimpered. *It was true then? She was hexed?*

She jumped up. There was one way of finding out. Kaia had once told her about it. She ran to the bedroom, picked up a small scissors on the dresser, attacked her pillow, slashed it open. Yes. There it was. Some of the ancient down had been rolled into a garland. Directly below her head. A sure sign. She had been hexed.

She crushed her head between her palms, elbows jutting. She would force the rest of Kaia's story from her brain. How did one rid oneself of a hex?

She remembered. Kaia had said that, to get rid of it, one had to give oneself the bloody flux.

And how did one do that? Throw elder into milk. And the bark of white cedar.

Yes. Get rid of both the hex and the child. Get rid of it. She ran to the kitchen. She grabbed up the milk pitcher. A pan. She poured a little in the pan, set it on the hot stove. She ran into the pantry. Got two small glass jars filled with herbs. One smelled bitter, the

other tansy. Yes. Elder and white cedar. She ran back to the stove, sprinkled a handful of each into the milk.

She stood waiting. She breathed heavily. The child in her belly was a lump like stone.

She took the pan and drank the milk. It was warm. It was bitter with herb. She slupped.

A hiccup seized her. It shook her. She looked around for a chair. As she turned, she slipped on the glob of fat that had flipped to the blue-gray linoleum floor. She fell heavily, jarring her belly. She swooned.

It seemed but a moment and she came to again. She was about to get up when another violent clutching began to gallop within her.

She rose to her feet.

She had to go. She ran to the door. She stumbled out into the snow, running for the privy. If only she could make it. The bottom seemed to be dropping out of her belly.

Another spasm ripped her. She fell. Something rammed inside. There was a long pain.

A slippery warmth flowed along her legs. Gasping, she raised herself up a little. At her feet, bloody in the white snow, lay something that looked like a skinned kitty.

Vaguely she saw Pier loom up before her. In his blue-black mackinaw, he looked like the dark shadow of death itself. She heard him exclaim, "Why, she's throwed her young!"

There was a sudden shutting of doors in her mind. She fainted away.

BOOK THREE

THE GOLDEN SUN

1. SPRING CHORES

. I .

YEARS WITH THEIR FLUX OF DAYS PASSED ON.

Floods, dry spells, frosts, hails spretted the pond. For a moment the hitting stone disturbed the limpid surface, splashed up, exploded a miniature watery volcano, spilled a spray. But ever again the rising waters fell back, and the rippling rundles from the cast stone circled away, and vanished.

In 1925, a thirsty March and May dried up the wells. Streams failed. Corn burned. The grain- and pasturelands, long dormant in a phlegmatic spring, grew too slowly in June to bring forth normal growth. And in October the cold rains and heavy snows wetted the corn.

In 1926, another dry spell came in the critical days of the first cellulation. Again the corn and the oat yields were below normal. Hayfields were slow. Only the potato vines and the apple trees yielded well. And too late, in September, a two-day rain fell on the vast undulations of the prairie, pouring, drenching. Water gurgled in the lowlands, in the centers of the sloping bowls, gorging the land with waste earth and silt. The Million Dollar Corner north of Le Mars was drowned in a welter of slushy, slimy humus.

In 1927, a late April frost killed buds and sprouting grains. Sudden storms kept men from the fields in May. An abrupt turnabout in June brought a lasting dryness, a dryness unnaturally chilled by northwest winds. In July a dry air pressed upon the land; only the early corn, deeply rooted into the subsoil, grew sprightly. A cooling August followed. And then, a strangely hot September.

In 1928, the heavenly rulers were in agreement. Rain sprinkled benignly upon the soils in early spring; skies cleared in time for seeding. All summer the rains fell at night, drew back the veils at dawn. It rained. It shone. It rained. It was a fine year, a noble year. Men were sure that times were back to normal.

. 2 .

The next year, in January, the greatest snows since '92 fell cold upon the prairie. White ribs as huge as the white moon's skeleton lay dazzling blue upon the land.

Pier and his family were marooned. To get salt and baking powder from town, he had to brave the buffeting winds on foot.

February too broke over the land in dry powdery snows. The wind wafted the white fluff over the running knolls and through the sleeping swales. Roofs of houses and sheds and barns, overburdened with unaccustomed weight, crashed in upon startled man and beast. Shivering, cowering sparrows and snowbirds hunted in vain for scraps of food; they picked at the bud nubs of trees; they perished by the thousands. And rabbits, driven by ravenous hungers, attacked the soft skins of fruit trees and berry canes.

At last, in March, the wintry grip relaxed. Slowly the gigantic mounds and stacks of snow began to melt. Small lakes pooled between the wind-mounded masses of snow.

Pier whistled. He sang. He was overjoyed. A good year was coming again. The melting snows were sure to soak the land. Only a prolonged summer drought could rob the soil of its moisture. A bumper was on the way.

This was the year all right. Sure, of course, last year had been a good year. Yes. But it had only been a sort of catch-up year, a year to lay up by, a year to catch up on all the small debts that had been mounting the four years previous.

Yes, this was the year. Yessir. Ac. This year he would take a running jump at luck. This year he would pay off the mortgage on the Philosophy, South Dakota, farm. The moment the crop was harvested and the bushels cashed into money, he would rush over and plump down a wad of cash on the counter. There would be no grass growing under his feet. No longer would interest be eating him up. He was going to be a free man.

So sure was he of the future that he had the brood mares, Maid and Mell, serviced by Otto Grimovich's stallion. In a few years Colonel and Topsy would be too old to work, and would have to be replaced.

Early in the morning, after the chores were done, he went to the corncrib-granary to clean some oats for seeding.

He dusted the old rectangular cleaner. The swirl of creamy lettering on its red front, *Excelsior*, came up clean.

He set the machine directly beneath the spout of the overhead grain bins. From four old gunny sacks he sewed together a snakelike tube. He fitted it over the mouth of the spout and tacked it on. He dropped the other end onto the open, mouthlike top of the cleaner.

He pulled the slot out. The oats came down with a rush. Quickly the grain filled the tube. Dust swirled up briefly around his face. He coughed, spat. He got two dozen empty grain sacks from a rafter, inspected them for holes and mice dung, and set them close at hand.

He was about to start the cleaning when it occurred to him that he should have another look at the black-and-white sow in number 7 in the hog house. She had shown signs of dilating.

He lighted his burned corncob pipe and stepped outdoors.

Pier had aged but little. His face was as full as ever, his eyes as clear. Only in his red hair, where a few more silver hairs were show-

ing, and only in his neck, where two wrinkles were beginning to cut deep into the skin, were there signs the years were passing by.

The wind on the yard, sweeping over the cold snow, was chilly. An overcast hid the sun. The white yard was strange without shadows.

Pier sloshed through a puddle of water between the granary and the barn. He snuggled inside his blue-black mackinaw, pulled his dusty blue cap down over his bushy hair. The edges of the cap rustled his red sideburns.

The barnyard was even more sludgy with half-frozen pools and half-melted piles of muddied snow. The horses looked up from their watering at the tank and eyed him. A long dangling mat of shedding winter hair hung from Queen's belly. Colonel and Topsy, the blacks, were thinner than usual.

He put out his pipe as he stepped into the hog house. He caught instantly the familiar scent of curdled dung acrid with putrefaction, of old straw heavy with memories of last summer's threshing. And faintly, but surely, he caught at another smell too: birthing. He hastened down the dusty alley, plumping noisily along in his rubber four-bucklers.

But the sow still was not ready. He rubbed her bristly black ear. She grunted, her fat sides and haunches rippled flabbily. Her eyes were closed. Her rubbery snozzle was wet. He patted her once more, kicked a little straw around her, sighed, and left.

Entering the granary again, he took off his stiff mackinaw to free his arms. He limbered his arms about his chest a few times.

He pushed a galvanized tin bushel basket under the cleaner and, grabbing the handle, started up the machine. It wiggled. It jiggled under his heavy turning. It creaked. The grain sagged jerkily inside the tube. Slowly the basket filled.

He stopped to examine the cleaning. In the dusky light inside the building the oats looked like frozen maggots. He picked up a handful, smelled it, crunched it, and flupped it up and down in his cupped fingers a few times. He sifted it from hand to hand, saw some flying chaff and dust. He adjusted the machine. He tried another handful. Still some dust. He adjusted another screw, tested, and then turned on, satisfied at last.

When the basket was full, he pulled it out from under the machine, picked it up, swung it up between his spread knees. He opened

a sack beneath it and with deft bumps spilled the cleaned grain into it.

Once again he started up the crank. The turning was rhythmic. He tried to whistle. But the dust from the grain had dried his lips, had wrinkled them. He hummed. He broke into song:

"I am a farmer on the Sioux,
I laugh at all of you.
My barn is full of purebred stock,
I laugh at bloat and pock.
My pasture sounds with bull and boar,
I laugh at pest and war.
My cribs are gold with corn and wheat,
I laugh at drought and heat.
My bed is warm with wool and sheet,
I laugh at frost and sleet.
Oh! I laugh at all of you!"

Whistling, he swung another basketful into the sack.

He worked the morning long. Every half hour he stepped across the yard to look at the sow.

The sow dilated slowly. He heaved a sigh. Every spring he had trouble with the Poland Chinas. Last spring, at pigging time, he had lost four sows and a third of the pigs. He nodded. What with the roads clogged, and the new veterinarian drunk most of the time, it might be just his luck to have tight sows again. Mentally he calculated the time from their servicing to their probable pigging. Yes. Just about a hundred thirteen days had gone by.

He worked along, cleaning, sometimes singing, sometimes worrying.

He finished the cleaning just before dinner. With two deft hitches of twine string, he tied up all the sacks. He set them neatly near the door.

On his way to the house, he swung past the hog house for another quick look. He found a second black-and-white female just beginning the strange ludding sound of birthing. He drove the protesting beast into a pen next to the first sow, into pen number 8.

The first one had progressed no further. She still lay ruckling and sullenly grunting. He rubbed her ear and left.

While he munched on his dinner of boiled potatoes and canned

sausage, he mulled over another spring problem. The last few years the corn yield had been disappointingly low. It couldn't be the gophers. There weren't enough of them. Besides, the corn grew poorly over the whole field, and gophers and birds usually raided only the outside rows. No, it was something else. He shook his head slowly. Dropping four to five kernels per hill, he had still got but a stand of two. He pondered. Wal, maybe the seed corn was no good. He thought about that for a while and at last decided the only thing to do was to make a test case.

In the silent kitchen the sound of his chewing was loud. He glanced at Nertha. She sat hunched on her chair, idly poking at the food in her plate. Every few seconds she looked with vacant, glazed, green eyes at Teo's empty chair. The boy was at school. She sighed. She stood up, went to the stove, poured out a pot of boiled rice in milk into a bowl, set it steaming on the table in front of Pier. Her finger slipped into the edge of it and she lifted up her soiled apron to wipe it carefully. Sighing, she sat down, leaning forward again.

Her silence, and the ticking clock on the shelf over the sink, got on Pier's nerves. He wished she would say something. He glanced at her again, trying to figure her out. Ever since the miscarriage she had been odd. Though there were evidences that she was aging a little, she actually did not seem older. Sometimes, in fact, she behaved like a giddy girl just in her teens. And if it hadn't been for that occasional cracked laugh of hers, Pier might have wondered if he wasn't witnessing the first case of a person growing young.

Pier blinked his eyes. He put her from his mind. This day he was going to keep himself free of anxiety. There was work to do, a lot of it, and he wanted to be happy doing it.

Finished eating, he returned to the corncrib-granary. He crawled through the low crib door and scrambled up the mounded pile of golden Yellow Dent corn. Some of the ears were still half covered with gray stringy husks, with tufts of red bearding corn silk. The crib floor looked like a barbershop's after a Saturday's cutting.

Perched on the very tiptop of the mound, Pier hunted for the good ear, the ear with kernels running straight from nub to point, with kernels not too sharp on tender finger tips, with tapered points reaching deep into the sockets of the red cobs. He searched. He scrabbled the pile apart. He tossed the good ears onto a heap at the foot of the mound.

He ruminated. He squinted. He smoked his pipe. Thoughts brewed in his mind. He reflected. He worked at formulating a policy for picking the best seed corn at the right time. He decided, after much pondering, and many pipes of tobacco, that next fall he should go into the field early in October and pick prize corn from the stalk. It would be a good thing to know the parent of a seed ear, to know whether or not it had stalk or ear or root rot, whether the stalk raised twin or singleton ears, whether the ear sprouted at a height that would be handy for the hurrying husker in the fall.

Sometimes he rested. Then he heard the mice creeping stealthily in the dark hidden caverns beneath him, heard them scurrying on the sills above. Once a gay, quick mister sat facing him just a foot away. It cocked its head at him, sniffed, crossed its beady black eyes. It looked down over the edge of the sill. It looked at him.

Pier studied it for a long moment. Then, suddenly wiggling his ears, he winked at it. The mouse vanished with a whipping flip of tail.

Slowly the afternoon bore on. The dark shadows of the early winter evening stole through the cracks of the crib. The sullen clouds brooded low over the building.

It was four o'clock when Pier scrambled down from his perch. Looking at the heap at the foot of the big pile, he guessed he had picked about ten bushels of prime corn. He took up an armful and sat down beside a basket in the crib alley. Taking an ear in each hand, he shelled them by rubbing one against the other. The golden corn, spurting off the dusty scarlet cob, sprinkled on the tinny bottom of the basket with a rinning sound. It reminded him of harp music on the phonograph.

He grabbed up a handful, smelled. He examined the kernels in the falling light. He dropped some in his pocket. Tonight under the kitchen lamp he would cut a few of them open and look into their secret yellow hearts. And then, if that did not tell him anything, he would plant the rest of them in earth and manure right next to Nertha's flowers in the window box. The sun coming through the bay window would sprout them.

He heard a clinking sound coming from the east. He looked up and saw Teo coming home from school, coming down the rise, clanging his dinner pail against bony legs. The boy was idling along, alternately looking up at the telephone wires that had been strung

up last fall, and kicking through the old snow, examining the scattered exuviae of winter's laving upon the land.

Pier smiled. The boy was growing. Ten, going on eleven, Teo was already taller than most boys of thirteen.

Only one thing bothered Pier. Every day the boy was beginning to act more like Nertha. His ways were as silent as hers, his eyes as evasive.

The silent ways irked Pier. It had begun only last year. The boy had become sulky, almost stubborn at times; his once quick fingers slow. The boy seemed to have lost interest in the farm, in Pier himself.

Pier had not been aware of the change until one day the previous summer.

. . . Teo had asked if he could run the double-row.

Pier said, "Why, y'u ain't old enough for that, Teo."

"I'm almost growed, Pa."

"Uh-huh."

"An' besides, them single-rows is too easy. They ain't fun no more."

"Oho," Pier exclaimed, laughing.

"Yeh." Teo looked down at his feet. "An' another thing. I'm gettin' tired a farmin'."

"What?"

"Yeh. We're always workin'. Workin'. Never gettin' nowhere."

"Wal I'll be damned."

"We work when we get up, we work after breakfast till noon, we work all afternoon, we work after supper, an' sometimes we even work at night. I'm gettin' tired a that, Pa. It don't leave me no time for fun. Fer readin'."

"But, Teo, you can't farm without workin' some."

"Yeh." Teo looked off to one side. "But I want some fun too."

"Fun. Fun. That's all you think of. Teo, didn't you know we came into this world to work?"

"Uh-huh."

Pier blinked, and changed his tack. "Besides, there's really plenty of fun in farmin'. Farmin's really a great big wonderful gamble. There's always something to do, to fight. That makes it fun for me."

"Well, that may be all right for you, Pa, but that still don't fix it

up for me. I still ain't got fun. I still don't get a chance to read the books I wanna read."

"Read. Read. Judas Priest, Teo, ain't you had enough of that yit? My God, I'd think yer head'd bust with all that stuff in it."

Teo said nothing.

Pier chewed his tongue and spat with the wind. "Readin'. Huh."

Teo's chin jutted. "Yeh, an' I don't get time to invent machines."

"Oh boy. You monkey around with them machines too much anyway. It's gettin' to be a sin with you."

Teo kicked at the ground, cast quick eyes up at his father, and sighed. . . .

Since that talk, Teo had avoided him.

He watched the boy come down the lane, kicking along, scuffing.

The scuffing disturbed Pier. It was costing him hard-earned money.

"Hi, Teo. Somebody offer you a new pair a boots today?"

Teo colored. A stubborn cloud filled his eyes. He rammed his free hand deep into the pocket of his soiled sheepskin.

"Did they?"

"No."

"Remember, boy, every penny you help me save today is a penny in your pocket tomorrow."

Teo grumbled. He pulled his black aviator cap tight around his head. A flap tickled his throat and he brushed it aside. He set his dinner bucket, once a tobacco pail, on the porch.

"What'd y'u say?"

"Nothin'."

"I'll have no talkin' behind my back, boy."

Teo shrugged faintly.

Pier resisted an impulse to kick the boy's backside. He bit his teeth. He said finally, putting his hand on the young shoulder that came almost to his chest, "Wal, you better get into yer chorin' duds, Teo. There's lots to do."

Teo said nothing.

"Yeh, this year ye're really going to have to help me. There's too much for me to do alone." Pier rubbed his rough beard. "And, maybe, somewhere along the line, I'll be able to find you some new jobs. Something you'll like."

Teo looked up. His eyes brightened.

Pier shook his head. The only time he could get a rise out of the lad was to promise him an adventure.

· 3 ·

Pier awoke. He found it dark. A pitch-black softness was pressing against his eyes.

He did not understand it. He did not know where he was.

Then he heard an aching groan beside him and knew that he was in bed with his sad wife Nertha. He stared into the dense night blackness. He could not trace a single line or curve. The ceiling, the walls, the foot of the bed were nowhere.

There was a vague stirring in his mind. He felt uneasy. What could have awakened him? A bad dream? Guilty conscience? Or, had the boy Teo called?

He listened to the night sounds. The walls seemed to rustle. There was a sudden crack of wood above him. A timber, bent beneath the ever increasing weight of years, had finally snapped. The house moved. There was a sighing in the air, a gentle breathing, as if he were lying on the tongue of the vast mouth of the earth. A softly pulsing, breathing air laved his body.

The sows! That was it. He was instantly wide awake. More out of reluctance to hear her doleful tongue than out of consideration for her, he eased himself from Nertha's side and out of bed with hardly a sound. She did not awaken.

He drew on his winter clothes, slipping his lean legs into the socks and overall and thick woolen shirt. He crept quietly through the living room, muffling the ticking alarm clock in his horny hands.

He lighted the pulldown lamp in the kitchen. In the pale yellow light he saw that it was three o'clock. He set the alarm clock on the shelf over the sink. He sniffed, blew his nose in a red, flapping handkerchief.

The floor was cold to his feet. He pulled on his shoes. The leather of the shoes was cold too and he wiggled his toes. He huddled in his clothes. Quickly he drew on his old blue-black mackinaw and heavy winter cap. He knelt down to buckle his rubber boots. He lighted a lantern, waiting for the orange glow to illuminate the sooty chimney.

Stepping outdoors, he was surprised to find that it was warm

enough to go without mittens. And, coming around the north side of the kitchen, he noticed the last lingering warmness of a dying chinook. The snow lay slushy beneath his crunching heel. A puddle of water near the privy splashed loudly. The box elder waved black branches over his head, its octopus-like arms sprawling against the stars above him. A bright silver-yellow star glinted over the roof of the barn. To his right, the shadows of his legs stalked over the yard.

The ground in the hog yard was rough with clusters of soggy cobs and curdles of gray pig dung. Pier told himself that this coming summer he would make Teo pick up the cobs as fast as the hogs cleaned off the corn kernels. Pig-yard cobs made wonderful fuel.

Near the hog house he stopped a moment to listen to the sounds of the night. There was a rustling. It was like the sound of someone going to bed in a room next door. The bat wings fluttering above him was the sussing of garments fluffing to the floor. The mill head above him was the creak of a bed. Once more there was the gentle breathing, in and out, of an open mouth upon him.

He entered the building. The lantern's saffron glow lighted up the brown, unpainted hall of the hog house. Frost lines at the jointures and cracks were melting.

Pier plumped down the alley. He swung the lantern into pen number 7. The sow seemed thinner, more gaunt. She lay on her side, extended, her head tossed out and spent. Her throat rattled. He leaned over to examine her closely. He studied her breathing. "The old lady sure looks tired," he muttered to himself. He felt of her flanks, and patted her. When she did not respond with the usual querulous grunt, he became worried. He rubbed her ear. He murmured, "What's a matter, missus, is it gettin' y'u down?"

His voice sounded hollowly in the building. He looked up, half expecting to see someone near. He laughed to himself.

Silently he stroked her sides. She had to have help.

He looked into pen number 8. The second sow was having trouble too. She was now fully dilated and lay panting. Bubbly spit drooled from her snout.

He hung the lantern on a nail in a beam above. He turned up the wick. The saffron light became a sharp yellow.

He tramped across the yard, going past the mill, sloshing through the puddles by the privy again, turning into the porch. He was care-

ful to take off his boots and shoes in the kitchen. He lighted a handful of cobs in the stove, and out of habit set the water kettle up front. He went softly up the stairs; there was no need to awaken Nertha. She would only raise a fuss. Besides, the poor woman could use the sleep. It might help clear her mind.

He entered the boy's room. "Wake up, Teo. Wake up," he whispered. His voice sounded hoarse in the night. He leaned over the bed in the dark. The skinny figure of the boy lay beneath his pressing hand. "Wake up, Teo. It's Pa. Are y'u awake?"

"Huh?"

"It's Pa. Come. Ye're t'come with me. No noise now. We don't want to wake Mom."

Teo jerked upright. "Huh?"

"I got a job fer y'u, Teo. A job only y'u kin do." Against the window, Pier could just make out the boy's silhouette.

"Oh. Yeh."

"Come."

"What's up, Pop?"

Pier swallowed. The boy's old-time greeting stirred him. "You'll see. It's a special job. Only you kin do it."

"Comin'."

"Awright. An' don't make no noise, boy."

"Okay, Pa."

Pier was just turning to go out of the door when a sudden glow came up around them. He started. It was Nertha, her hair hanging uncombed over her shoulders.

"What y'u two doin' up?" she asked, her eyes drawn to bit points.

Pier cleared his nose. "It's the sows. They're comin' in."

"Oh." She paused, blinking. She held up the lamp. The light spread. In her wrinkled nightgown she was very ugly to Pier.

"Yeh. Wal, we're in a hurry, so . . ."

"What's the boy doin' up?"

"Why, t'help me."

"With sows?"

"Sure."

"At his age?"

"Wal, what's wrong with his age?"

"But sows?"

"Hell, it don't amount t'nothin', woman."

She looked at Teo.

"Woman, let me tell y'u something. When I was a boy Âlde Romke got me out a bed many a night to help him with the piggin'."

"Why don't you do it now then?"

"Arms're too big. I'd rip 'em."

Still looking at Teo, she asked, "You wanna go, Sonny?"

"Sure."

"Pier, he's only a little boy."

" 'Boy,' my eye," Pier growled, angering, and knowing he had to hurry back to the sows. "He goes."

She looked nervously to one side. She shook her head. She was about to cry.

"But why not?"

She looked down. She flushed. "Do you want him to know, then?"

"Know what? Where pigs come from? Judas Priest, woman, what's wrong with that? He sees the boar breedin' 'em. What goes in is gotta come out sometime." He turned to Teo. "Come, boy. We got work to do."

Teo bounded down the steps ahead of him. They entered the warm kitchen together. While Teo dressed in shoes and jacket, Pier got a can of antiseptic from a pantry shelf and poured it into a pan of steaming water. He picked up a jar of shortening grease.

They hurried outdoors, Pier carrying the pan and the jar. "Be careful of that puddle there," he warned. "An' there's a whopper over there by the hog-house door."

They entered. A huddle of pregnant sows lay sleeping in an open ward along the west side. A gasping sound came from the other end. They hurried.

The sow in number 7 was once more trying to rid herself of her burden.

"Good," Pier exclaimed. "We got a chance yit. Teo, go get a little cold water out a the tank by the windmill. In this pail here. This water in the pan is a little too hot."

Angle-legged, Teo jumped to the task, was back in a moment.

Pier rolled up his sleeve. "Now pour in a little."

Teo did so.

Pier caught up a palmful from the pan and let it run down over his elbow. It was as warm as blood. He nodded. He stirred the water. "All right. Take off yer jacket. Yer shirt."

Slowly Teo complied. He unbuttoned his shirt and underwear, baring his right arm and shoulder. He looked at Pier questioningly. He sniffed as if there were something disagreeable around.

"Wash yer arm."

"This one?"

Pier laughed a little. "Wal, you don't suppose it'd be the one still covered, do you?"

Teo tried to laugh too. He plunged his arm into the mixture, washed it thoroughly. He cupped up a handful and splashed it into his armpit.

"Now, now. Just so most is clean. All right. Rub some a that lard over your arm. Make it real greasy."

Teo put it on reluctantly.

"All right. Ready?"

"Yeh." Teo's eyes widened wonderingly.

"Okay. Look. Get down on yer side. Like so. Then, reach in here. Right here. Just push in, gentle, an' then, when you get in a ways, wal . . . I'll tell you what to do next then."

Teo hung back a little. He shivered. He wrinkled his nose again. Goose pimples began to rash his arm. He looked around, seemingly trying to locate a bad smell.

"Come, be a man now."

"But . . . all that grease an' blood?" The pupil's of Teo's eyes became wide and dark.

"Sure. It won't hurt you. Besides, that's how you were born once. So don't get so uppity here all of a sudden."

Teo lay down on his side, slowly. He hesitated.

Pier bit his lip to suppress his impatience. "Get a wiggle on, boy."

The sow groaned, her belly convulsed.

Teo drew back.

"Come now, boy. We ain't got all night. That sow's dyin' an' here ye're crochetin' around like a nervous old woman."

Teo entered the swollen, inflamed pudenda. His hand, then his wrist, then his elbow disappeared.

"Now. Take it easy. Ye're just about there," Pier said, his eyes softening. He sat down on his heels beside Teo. He patted the boy on the shoulder, stroked the sow. "Wait fer her to get another pain, another heave, an' then we'll do her."

They waited quietly. The parturient sow in number 8 scuffled and

grunted in the straw behind them. The sows in the big ward lay snoring.

Teo coughed. Pier felt the boy's body shudder beneath his hand.

"Steady now, boy. Steady. It'll soon be over. Just think of all the money we're savin' by not gettin' the vet."

The boy ducked his head. He swallowed.

A quiver stirred in the old sow.

Pier leaned forward instantly. "All right. Go into her. You'll find a sort of a little door there. An openin'. Kind a tight. Go into it. You'll find some little bolonies tight to the roof with little strings. Feel around careful, boy. Careful. There. Now, try to pick off the first in line. Careful. Don't break his string. Take it easy. Take him back with y'u like he's a little puppy. Cup him in yer hand, behind the head, between yer two fingers. Take it easy. Take it . . . Ah. Now. Every time she heaves, just pull that little doggie bolony along a little, pull it closer . . ."

Teo shivered. He dropped his head on the sow's dirty flank. "Pa, I can't. I can't."

Pier stiffened. "Keep goin'! Keep goin'!"

"I can't."

"Can't? Wal, I say, git goin'! The old sow's dyin'. Git goin'."

"I can't." The boy buckled over, his empty stomach trying to vomit.

"Oh, dammit t'hell anyway. What's wrong? Ain't you got the guts?"

"Ugh!" The boy began to draw out his arm.

"Hey, damn you, git it back in there." Pier grabbed the arm and tried to force it in again.

"Oh, Pa. I just can't. Can't."

Pier cursed. He jerked out the boy's arm and kicked him aside. The boy rolled over in the straw; lay still.

Muttering, Pier jerked off his own mackinaw and shirt, peeled down his underwear to his waist. He washed his arm and shoulder, also greased them, lay down beside the sow. "By God, I'll get them damned pigs out even if I have to kill her."

He pushed. It was tight. He worked through the opening. He felt the sow's uterus contracting around his arm like a bullhead fish trying to swallow a fist. He fumbled around for the first little pig. Even though warm blood was coursing over his arm, his hand became

numb. The tightness around his elbow had shut off the circulation. He sweated. He found the little pig.

Catching it behind its apple-sized head, he drew it forth against the sucking that tried to hold his arm. With a whosh it fell against his chest. He stroked it, laid it aside, entered again.

While he was getting the second pig, the first began to wiggle against his chin. It staggered and fell. It was a wrinkled, two-pound little sausage crawling and stumbling and crawling. At last it found a dug. It suckled, bumping. Tears filmed Pier's eyes.

Then the second came.

Within fifteen minutes Pier brought forth eight strong pigs. The old sow grunted weakly, though contentedly. He made sure that no more were coming, and then sat up. He puffed. It had been a long run. He got to his knees and sat back on his heels.

He poured hot water over his greasy arm and shoulder, rinsing the skin.

Then he remembered Teo. He looked around quickly, afraid he might have broken the lad.

But Teo still lay where Pier had kicked him, his bare shoulder and arm smudged with bits of dirt and chaff. He was staring at the nudging pigs.

"Wal, ye're still alive."

Teo stirred.

"Wal, boy, I'm sorry I booted y'u. It . . . wal, we just couldn't wait."

Teo got to his feet.

"Now, boy. Don't feel bad. Next time you'll do better."

Teo rubbed his hands. "I guess I ain't made for them things, Pa I just can't stand it."

"Uh-huh."

"It's that smell. The grease is bad, but that smell . . . blll. That's what really gets me. It's like a sour, red-cabbage smell. You know, when Mom's cannin' red cabbages?"

Pier wondered. It could be. Noses were funny things. Touchy. He nodded. "Wal, it's all right. You'll get over it."

Teo relaxed. He joined Pier in washing his hands. His eyes searched Pier's face anxiously. "I did try hard though, didn't I?"

"That y'u did."

Teo was silent for a minute; then grinned shyly. "I'll bet Jimmy's never done a thing like this."

"Him? Never."

Teo smiled.

Pier hid his pleasure. The boy hadn't been altogether buffaloed by the bloody business.

Teo said, gazing at the sow and her brood, "Animals sure is different from machines. You kin make a machine, but animals has got to get borned."

Pier grunted. "Boy, y'u sure hit the nail on the head that time."

Pier stood up. He was about to pull on his shirt and mackinaw when he heard the sow in number 8 groaning. "Jumpin' Joseph! What's louse here? I suppose it's her turn now." He leaned over the partition. "Sure enough. By golly. Things are sure poppin' aroun' here tonight." He turned to look at Teo. "Wal, boy, how about it, wanna try again? My arm's still too big, you know."

"Well . . ."

"Wal?"

Teo's green eyes darkened with reluctance. "Well, I'll try," he said at last.

"That's all I ask."

· 4 ·

The well under the windmill had dried up. The thirsty, licking tongues of the '25, '26, '27 dry spells had cut short the life of the old bore.

To give it a breathing space, Pier hauled water for the stock from the Big Sioux. The work was disagreeable. With a pail he had to dip the water from a sandy ford and lift it into a dozen five-gallon cans on a wagon. His fingers were chilled to the bone in the spring-fed river.

But the breather did not help the old well. Even two heavy rains did not raise the water level.

At last Pier decided there was nothing to do but to get Otto Grimovich. Otto, he had heard, sometimes drilled wells in his spare time.

Right after the noon meal, Pier got into his green Buick and whirled off the yard. He turned west on the country road. To his right spread his pasture, to his left the Grimoviches'. The grass,

though short, was a lively blue-green. The road undulated gently downward toward the Big Sioux.

He turned south at the corner. The road lifted. To the west fell the drop-offs, slipping into the river bottom.

Pier studied the Grimovich farmland to his left as he drove along. The boys farmed an entire section of land, six hundred forty acres. It lay like a napkin over an apple, with its center, a sand-topped hill, higher than its four corners.

The pastureland ended and plowed land began to flow past. Neat corn-planter tracks ribbed the dark, worked soil. Pier glanced down the rows and nodded admiringly at the straight lines cutting the lifts and the dips.

He rolled over the rise. Looking back, he saw the tree tips of his farm slowly vanishing behind the hill. He coasted to the corner.

He headed east. Toward him came the ash-and-willow windbreak of the Grimoviches. The grove lay like an L, one side running east and west, the other north and south, with the buildings inside the crook and facing the southeast. The grove stood stalwartly, ready for any speeding northwest blizzard, white or black. It stood guard over the home against the pounding prairie line storms.

Of the buildings, the small white house stood nearest the road, surrounded by a neat wire fence. Inside grew a few flower shrubs, lingering vestiges of where once Ma Grimovich had dreamed a dream. North of the house sat a garage, its door facing the yard. Farther on squatted a long, narrow, red-and-white chicken house, its many windows facing the morning sun. Near the north angle of the windbreak a huge cornerib and granary bulked, its alley opening to the east and west. Directly east, like a buffalo crouched, brooded the blood-red barn. It was an enormously bulky structure, built by a pioneer full of thoughtful respect for eight-by-twelve-inch ash timbers. Most of its doors faced a square corral on its dawn side. A mound of manure lay before each doorway. Ten-foot palings protected the cattle from thrilling prairie whistlers. And last, directly south of the barn and straight east of the house, across the main yard, stood the long low hog house.

Pier parked by the house-yard gate and got out. A collie bitch came running up and barked at him. Pier petted it and it quieted.

He stood a moment, noting the fat buff chickens peeking in the yard, the cattle lying on the ground chewing cuds, the hogs slopping

themselves in water holes near a creek below the hog house. There was a pleasant odor of animals about, of fermenting manure piles, of well-oiled machinery. The yard reflected hustle and work. Planters, disks, a well driller, harrows, plows had been left where the horses had been unhitched from them at the end of day. Some of the machines were beginning to show signs of rust. Enclosed by the trees and the buildings, the yard felt homey. The casual neatness pleased him.

Seeing no one around, Pier started up the walk. He knocked. It took a moment for someone to come to the door and so he glanced around once more, looking far out over the prairies. To the south he saw a vague gathering of trees, knew it for the Brandt place. Far to the southeast another blur wavered on the horizon. He wondered what mysterious things were going on behind that distant clump of tree and board. Perhaps there too someone was calling on a neighbor.

He knocked again. There was a scuffling of feet inside, a scratch of chair on floor, and then massive Otto, his face shiny clean, his lips greasy with food, came to the door. "Hallo."

"Hi, Otto. Wal, still eatin', I see."

"Yeh." Otto stood uncertainly, food bulging in his mouth like a nut in a pocket gopher's cheek. His milk-blue eyes winked.

"Say, you got a minute?"

"Sure. C'mon in."

Pier stepped inside.

Otto closed the door and turned his bull-body slowly. "Peter, put on another plate."

Pier protested. "No, no. I've et. I'm full as a tick."

"Well . . ."

"No. Really." The darkness confused Pier a moment. Then, blinking his eyes, he made out the figures of Peter and George sitting at a clean table. It was laden with a wealth of food. Both boys were busily gulping gravied potatoes and red beets, hurriedly slurping hot amber tea.

Otto dragged up a chair. "Here."

Pier accepted it, sat down, took off his cap, hooked it over his knee, combed his red hair with rough fingers. He unbuttoned his outdoor jacket. "Jumpin' Joseph, you boys sure give yourselves a spread, don't you? Pete, you still chief cook and bottle washer?"

Peter nodded, swallowing down a mass of the succulent food.

Pier looked at Otto and George and said, laughing, "No wonder you two don't want a woman. With food like that, and no whining to go with it, it's like havin' heaven itself."

Otto smiled.

Pier crossed his legs. He noticed how all three brothers were as blond as shining sunlight, how all were as bulky as bulls.

Pier glanced around the room. Again the neatness caught his eye. The black-and-nickel stove shone. So did the pans on it. The sink in the corner was empty of dishes. The floor, though a little dusty in the corners, looked swept. Through the door opening into the dining room Pier saw well-polished furniture, heavy chairs, a black room-dominating table. Portraits of gray-whiskered men and long-faced women hung gloweringly from shadowed walls.

Otto finished. He pushed back his chair, filled his mouth with sunflower seeds. "Well, what's up?"

"Otto, my well's run dry."

Otto's face became troubled. "Well, I tell you, Pier. I don't think I can do it right now. We're right in the middle a corn planting."

"I know."

"An' we got a lot a extra work this spring. An' George here can't get around because he's stuck himself with a pitchfork. His foot's all swoll up."

Pier glanced under the table, saw George wasn't wearing a shoe on his right foot. A bandage bulked under a brown-and-white cotton sock. "That's too bad. Been to see a doc yet?"

"No," George mumbled.

Pier filled and lighted his corncob pipe. "Wal, I kin see how it is." He puffed. "Still and all, I'm no further along than you fellers. Just half done plantin' corn myself. An' I need that water bad, Otto."

"Sss-pitch." Otto spat an empty hull into the wood box by the stove. He looked glumly at the floor. He seemed to be waiting for George and Peter, who had stiffened a little when Pier had made known the purpose of his call, to say something.

Then George finished his meal and he backed away from the table and filled his mouth with seeds. "Sss-putch. I still can't ride that planter with this foot, Otto."

And Peter finished, pushed back. "Sss-petch. An' I more than got my hands full on the yard here, what with the cooking too."

Pier, seeing that Otto was torn between loyalty to his farm and his friendship for him, said soothingly, "Wal, forget it, Otto. I'll find me a driller somewheres else. Hell, there should be another around somewhere." Pier stood up.

"The hell with it," Otto said suddenly, standing up too. "We're brothers and neighbors together. I'll come. Pete can plant, an' George can cook for once."

· 5 ·

For three days they dug south of the hog house; Pier pushing himself to the limit, Otto ponderously taking his time.

At a hundred twenty feet, two feet below the old well, the auger hit a hard substance.

They tried to ram through it, but the square rods buckled. Shaking his head worriedly, Otto reversed the machine and pulled up to have a look at the point.

The horses turned in the circling power jack. Slowly the long rods rose in the derrick.

Pier rose to his toe tips when the bucket appeared over the lip of the new hole. He reached in for a handful. A few bits of freshly broken rock shone pink-purple in the forenoon sun. "Yip, red rock. Just like the other one. Dammit, we dug fer nothin'."

"Sss-pitch. I might have known," Otto said slowly.

"Then why the hell didn't you say so?"

Otto chewed slowly. He looked at the bucket again. "I can't understand it. There should be water right on that rock. It can't run away. Maybe we hit a high spot on it."

Pier kicked at the ground. He wrestled inside his blue jacket. "Three whole days shot t'hell."

"We could try a stick a dynamite. Blow it apart."

Pier swore. "Do anything you want. I need water."

Otto nodded.

At that moment Pier's quick ears caught the sound of a motor purring east of the house. He looked up.

A blue car was swinging slowly into the lane. Peering through the just-budding apple trees, Pier tried to catch a glimpse of the driver. "Huh, wonder what that bugger wants. It's some salesman, I suppose. Epsom salts, minerals, wormers, rings for rooters."

The car stopped between the woodshed and the barn. Shep ran to the car and challenged it. The front door opened. A thin man dressed in tan pants, blue shirt, a black bow tie, and tan jacket stepped out.

"Why, that's the Old Dreamer. Pederson. He must a got hisself a new car. Huh. Wonder what he wants?"

Pederson stooped a little when he walked. He came through the gate, with Shep trying to lick his hand.

"I see you're digging a well," Pederson greeted.

"Hi. Yeh, we're tryin'." Pier put his hands in his pockets. Work in the cold water, with the streaming steel rods, with the coarse cement curbs, had cracked the skin on them. When he rubbed them together, they set off a tinny squinching sound that made him shiver. It reminded him of Ma Lysbeth scraping pans with a spoon.

Pederson looked into the raw hole. He kicked at the mounds of yellow and blue clays. He picked up a knot of rusty gravel and burst it open in his thin, veined hand. Then, smiling and nodding, he asked, "Hit rock yet?"

"Rock? We hit hell itself," Pier ejaculated.

Otto agreed. "Sss-piteh. Ya. An' red rock too."

"No water?"

"Not even a smell of it."

"That's funny. Should be good water country out here. That red rock makes a good catch basin." Pederson threw away the gravel and picked up a piece of clay. He talked, as if to himself. "Loess all right. Some leeching too. Huh." He glanced at Otto. "No water, eh?"

Both men shook their heads.

Pederson pointed to the old well. "That neighbor well down to red rock too?"

"Yip."

"Uh-huh. Try blasting yet?"

Otto drew up his huge shoulders. "We wus just gonna do that."

"May work. No use having all that digging go to waste." Pederson threw down the handful of clay. He looked with interest at the small gully in the orchard. "Didn't pick a very good place for the new well, did you?"

"How do y'u figger?"

Pederson quirked a thin eyebrow at Pier. "Why, man, it's right in the path of that river there."

"River?" Pier raised his brow too. "What river? The Big Sioux runs out there."

"I know it does. But I'm talking about the new river. The one that's going to run right through this yard in a couple of years. The one that's going to swallow that privy there, that windmill, and maybe even the house."

"What junk are you talkin' now?"

Pederson smiled owlishly.

"You mean," continued Pier, "you mean that a dinky little gully-washer'll dig a hole that big?"

"It can." Pederson pointed. "That field there, you plowed it up and down the hill some years ago, remember?"

Pier narrowed his eyes. "Ye're still harpin' on that, I see."

Pederson's owl eyes blinked. "Well, Pier, like I've said before, you're a leader and if I can convince you I can convince others. They'll follow your lead."

"Oh."

"Yes, Pier. You've got to plow her according to her contours. And keep your plow off land that should be pastured. When you shave, you don't go against your whiskers, do you? You'd cut your skin if you did. It's the same with working the land. Always go with her. When you've married the land, you've got to learn to protect her. Keep the rains and the winds from rooting around in her. Keep them from digging into her skin. If you don't, your farm'll wind up in the Gulf of Mexico. Or in some city slicker's eye up East."

"Wal," Pier began, "I tell y'u, Pederson, I don't go much fer them newfangled idees."

"New? Why, man, what I'm telling you goes back thousands of years. To China, to the Philippines, four thousand or more years ago. Why, in the Philippines the farmers there hang their farms in the sky. They've banked and terraced the hills so much that the farm goes up steps into heaven itself."

"Aw——"

"And in China, why, the people there have been using soil-saving ways till time before Adam. They've had to. You fellows, you and your fathers, have only farmed this land for a good sixty years. Just wait until you've had to farm it as long as they've had to. You'll learn, or die. Why, those farmers of China are so saving, they go into the cities after dark and collect night soil, human dung, to

fertilize the ground. The city people set it out behind the house in little slop jars. And what do you freehanded Americans do? You bury it down so deep not even a good tree's taproot can get to it. Man, you've got to save every little crumb of waste."

Pier crinkled his eyes scornfully. "You mean to tell me our land'll give out someday?"

"Give out? It'll disappear. Just like what happened in Mexico." Pederson took a step toward Pier and lifted a hand. The vein on his forehead throbbed. The lines around his eyes sharpened. "I suppose you think this nation of ours is the first decent, civilized one to come upon this earth? Man, let me tell you something. There was once, down in Mexico, a people that was so much bigger and better and wiser than we Americans that we don't even compare to it. Aztecs. But pretty soon their land give out and the people went down. Now they're just ignorant Indians. So ignorant they don't even remember they was once great."

"Wal, if they was smarter than us, how come they didn't figger out a way to save theirsel's?"

"That's just it. They didn't know the brass-tack facts. Just like you. You don't know 'em either."

"But you do?"

"Pier, if there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that. Man, wake up. Or pretty soon the hard-iron fact of poverty will hit you right smack-dab in the face."

Pier took his hands out of his pockets. He fumbled for his corncob pipe and lighted it.

Pederson dropped his arm. He sighed. "Pier, when your old lady is sick, when she's turned barren, what do you do? You go get a doctor, don't you?"

Otto studied the ground, pushing his toe around. "Then, ye're a sort of land doctor then?"

"Right." Pederson puffed on his corncob. "I know what you're thinkin', you two. It costs money to hire a doctor. And you're right. Part ways. Yet, let me tell you something. Treat a woman right, and she'll treat you right. Meals. Love. But treat her wrong, beat her, kick her, tear off her clothes, and she'll either whore or suicide."

Pier stirred uneasily.

Pederson's gray eyes roved over the yard. He said, his voice becoming gentle again, "I see your cows got some heft there." He

pointed to a dozen black-and-whites coming up the pasture lane. "Look like they're good milkers t'boot."

"That's right."

"Uh-huh. Got 'em t.b.-tested yet?"

"No. What's that?"

"Haven't you heard? The guv'ment's testing all the cows in the country for t.b. bugs. It's a sickness that the cattle pass on to women and children."

"Huh."

"Better get 'em tested right away, Pier. May cause you trouble if you don't."

"Is that what you drove on my yard for?"

Old Dreamer swallowed. He seemed to pull himself up short. "Oh, that's right." He laughed to himself. "I came here to get some dirt. You see, every time somebody digs a well, the guv'ment wants me to collect the dirt. So it can get some idea about the land hereabouts. How deep the sand goes, the clay, the red rock." He hurried to the car and got a half-dozen little pails and a small shovel. He began to fill them from various piles, asking Otto from what depths each had come.

While they were talking, Pier happened to see Shep come out of the chicken coop, sneaking. Pier cursed.

Pederson looked up, startled. "What's up?"

Pier pointed. "Oh, that damned dog's taken t'eatin' eggs. Here, Shep, damn y'u, I'll teach y'u."

"He a good dog?"

"That's the hell of it. He's a wonderful dog for cows an' so. An' the kid Teo likes him. Or else I'd shoot him."

Pederson stood up. He raised a thin hand. "Wait. In that case, all he needs is a lesson. Got some pepper and turpentine? And some glue?"

Pier raised a brow, glancing at Otto wonderingly. "Why, I guess so."

"Get some. And let the dog go for a minute."

Pier got pepper and glue from the house, and a can of turpentine from the tool shed.

Pederson took them and went into the chicken house. He found a low nest near the door with an egg in it, one that Shep was likely to snatch on his next trip. With Pier watching, Pederson nicked a tiny

hole into each end, blew out the insides. With a fleck of cigarette paper he pasted shut one of the holes. He poured in some dry, powdery black-gray pepper, some turpentine. Then he closed the second hole with still another fleck of cigarette paper. Gently he laid it in the nest and walked out. "Now. Just watch. When he tackles that egg, it'll give him quite a surprise."

"Pretty rough," commented Pier.

"Well, it isn't as rough as a bullet. Besides, it really won't hurt him. And, if he tries it again, give him another dose. He'll soon stop."

They walked back to the well.

Otto in the meanwhile had been dismantling the derrick.

"Hey, what's the idea?" Pier asked, startled. "Ain't you gonna dig for me?"

Otto spat. "Sure. But not here. If we gotta blast, we might as well blast in the old well. An' be sure we ain't got our well in the middle of Pederson's river."

Pier said nothing.

Pederson nodded. "He's got the idea, Pier. That's it." Pederson went back to filling his little pails.

They were pulling out the rods from the old well, when there was a yelp from the yard. Looking up, Pier saw Shep streaking out of the chicken house, yowling, raising and lowering his head in frenzy, pawing at it, rolling in the grass.

Pier glanced at the Old Dreamer. "Huh, he ain't half as dumb as he looks," he muttered to himself.

. 6 .

It was almost morning when an idea awoke Pier. Pederson had touched it off.

Pier stirred. He glanced at the window to see if the spring dawn had come. Staring through the gray in the room, he could barely make out the swirling morning-glory design on the wallpaper beyond the foot of his bed.

Quietly he slipped from bed and dressed. He let Nertha sleep on. He had something in mind for her today and she would need all the sleep she could get. He hurried into the kitchen, lighted the pull-down lamp, started a fire in the stove, put on the coffee water. He

dressed in his light jacket and thin blue cap and boots. He stepped outdoors. It had just begun to day.

The morning-fresh air was a song. He felt joyous. This was a morning. He hummed:

"Oh, braid her a crown of clover,
Braid it pink and green and silver."

Strange he hadn't thought of it before. A man could be holding an idea right in his own head, like a hammer in a hand, and still not see it.

He walked swiftly over the greening yard. He brushed past the sticky leaves of the box elder. He opened the yard gate, at the same time unhooking the brake on the mill. He looked up, stretching his throat. The weathercock swung into the wind and the mill started turning. He remembered the struggle he and Otto had had with the belly of the old well, how they had fixed her with a charge of dynamite deep in her bowels.

He called the horses and fed them. Even though he did not plan to use them today, it was a good idea to keep them in the habit of obeying his call. He woke the cows and spilled ground corn for them.

Then, coughing and spitting a ball of milky phlegm from his throat, he went back to the house to bibber his wake-up cup of coffee. He sniffed the air. Spring flowed over the eastern horizon toward him. The fleece of dawn was pink-white; the sky above blue-black. The webbing leaves of the box elder and the maples before the house tossed in the casual morning wind.

When he entered the lamplit kitchen, he found Nertha up and puttering over the stove. The boy was still in bed. Now was the time to tell her.

But when he opened his mouth to talk, he couldn't find the words to say it. Gulping, he looked at her, looked at the floor.

Nertha was as white and as drawn as ever. Incoming gray was deepening the natural hue of her silver hair. Her eyes were a listless green.

She turned on him. "You never did learn to take off them dirty boots a yours, did you?"

"I forgot, Ma. I'll take 'em off pronto." He leaned forward to unbuckle them.

" 'Forgot, forgot.' You're always forgettin'."

"Yeh." He placed the heel of one boot over the toe of the other and pulled it off. Then he slipped off the second by hand.

"I say, you never did learn to take off them dirty boots a yours, did you?"

"Yeh." He threw the boots on a mat near the door.

Pier drew his armchair up to the table. He ran his finger over the designs in the cream-and-blue oilcloth. "Can I have some coffee, please?"

"Never did learn." Nertha turned from the stove with the coffeepot and poured out a cup for him and one for herself.

"Thanks." Pier dropped a spoonful of sugar and a dozen drips of cream into the steaming, sweet-smelling beverage. He stirred it. He looked at her. "How do you feel?"

The question surprised her. Her eyes cleared. She stiffened. "Me? Feel?"

Pier colored. "I mean, ye're all right, ain't you? I mean, good mornin'."

She looked at him a moment, not comprehending. She said nothing. She sat down again, turning her chair away from the table. She took a comb from the side pocket of her house dress and spread her hair over her knee. In the mellow light of the kerosene lamp, the silver became white-gold.

Pier sipped the hot coffee.

"I say, both a you men never did learn to take off them dirty boots a yours, did you? I just can't seem to learn y'u."

Pier blinked. Trying to smile, he said quietly, "You said that all already."

Instantly her eyes flicked open, and she drew up, as if she realized she had made a bad slip. Pier felt her eyes cautiously examining his face.

Pier bibbered slowly, savoring each drop with his tongue, smacking his lips, blowing.

She relaxed and began to comb steadily again. Her eyes became dreary.

The comb fell from her unsteady fingers. She leaned forward to pick it up. She sighed, and whined, "But still, you never did learn to take off them dirty boots a yours, did you? Tramp in on my nice clean floors. Don't pay no 'tention to my work. Just tramp in on it."

"Hey, woman, you said that already."

"Oh."

Pier shook his head. Her singsongs were beginning to drive him crazy.

She laid aside her comb and took up a long fold of her hair and balled it and built it up into a pyramid at the nape of her neck. From her side pocket she took green-colored bone hairpins.

She paused to rub her knee. And suddenly, drawing in a quick, deep breath, and her face contorting, she exploded a massive sneeze. For the second of the climax of it, and the moment after, an expression of satisfaction softened her lips.

Pier coughed. "Say, by the way, I hope you ain't planned nothin' special for today."

She looked up, her eyes clearing again. She took a pin from her lips, buried it into the mass of hair. "Special? You know I never go nowheres. I only work. An' work some more."

"Uh-huh."

Once more her eyes drooped and she singsonged, "I just don't seem to be able to learn you men to keep your dirty boots——"

"What I mean is, y'u ain't plannin' to bake bread or so, are y'u?"

"Ain't you had good bread lately?"

Pier shook his head, exasperated. "No, no. Not that. You see, I got something in mind. Something I want to do for you an' I wanted to know if it would bust up yer day."

She dropped her hands in her lap. "What've you got in mind for me?"

"Wal . . . wal . . . it's a sort of a surprise."

"For me?" A faint child smile stroked her lips. "For me. Really?"

"Yeh. Y'u see . . ." But even as Pier began, he saw her eyes wandering again. He hesitated.

She whined, "I just don't seem to be able to learn you men——"

"Hey, woman, listen to me, will you? I'm talkin' to you."

"Huh?"

"Look. This is what I got in mind. I been watchin' you. Been watchin' you close. Ever since you lost . . . ever since you went off yer feed, I've been thinkin' maybe we ought to go see a doc about it."

"Oh."

"Yeh, Nertha. Yeh." Tears suddenly welled in his eyes. Sympathy for her, for himself, rose in him. "We'll go see a doc an' he'll fix you up so you can whistle again. A woman ain't happy when she ain't

bearin' kids. Just like a bird ain't happy when it can't sing." He paused. He choked with sugary emotion. "Nertha, I've been mean to you. I ain't been payin' enough attention to you. I ain't caught on that a sorrerin' woman needs kids to make her happy again."

"But I ain't aimin' to have no more kids," she said suddenly, her eyes startlingly alert. She looked at Pier so sharply he was afraid she was reading his very mind.

"Oh, come now, Ma. Take it easy." He finished his coffee in a gulp and picked up his corncob pipe. "Take it easy." He puffed slowly. "I tell you what. You hurry up an' make us some breakfast, get Teo off to school, and we'll run up to Sioux Falls in the old Buick."

"I ain't aimin' to have no more kids."

"Now, now. I know what's best for you. Woman was put into this world to bear kids. That's what you should do an' then you'll feel better."

She stood up to pour him some more coffee. "But I ain't aimin' to have no more kids," she said.

Pier put his spoon across his cup to signify he didn't want any more. He talked on, as if he hadn't noticed her plaint. "Yeh, Nertha, it's this way. When a man marries hisself a woman, he takes on the responsibility a takin' care a her. He's got to keep things from botherin' her. Otherwise he can't expect her to produce." He put another match to his pipe. He puffed. He stood up and went to the door and pulled on his boots. "Now, while ye're makin' breakfast, an' gettin' the kid's dinner pail ready, I'll chorse. An' right after breakfast, we'll hit fer the city." He looked down into the red coals inside the bowl of the pipe, crossing his blue eyes a little. He pushed a straggling curl of red hair under his cap. "I really should be in the field today, gettin' the land ready for corn, but . . . it's just as important we get you fixed up." He nodded to himself. "So, get ready. Be sure to."

He stepped outdoors into the first scarlet explosions of dawn. He heard the village bells singing up the valley:

Sing! the day will be a song.
Cleng! the sun is dawning strong.
Ring! the morning air is clear.
Cleng! the hoe awaits the hand.
Sing! the day is running sand.

Ho! Spring was here. And the sky straight above was as sparkling blue as last winter's spread of snow.

The skies were a high blue by the time Pier left Starum, and headed northwest toward Sioux Falls. He drove past Pederson's place. He cast wondering eyes at the hundred-odd Indian mounds bulting up the land. He looked admiringly at the rising towers of hills across the river. Then, concentrating, he drove across a rattling suspension bridge. *Br-r-r-ita-br-r-rumpta* and they were in South Dakota.

The car rose on a steeping hill. Red-purple Sioux quartzite outcroppings jagged angularly over the winding highway.

They came to the top. Ahead lay a sweeping table-flat prairie. Straight ahead and out of the earth rose the columnar grain elevator of Philosophy, South Dakota. Spread somewhere near it lay the farm that Teo would have someday.

Pier rolled the wheel, smiling to himself, enjoying the feel of the powerful motor in his hands. He glanced at Nertha, saw her folded hands in her lap, one thumb nervously rubbing the other, saw her staring dully ahead. She looked uncomfortable in her old brown plush coat and gray muffler.

He looked beyond, through the flapping curtains. "Out there's Squaw Tit. To the north there."

She did not answer.

He reached down a hand, touched her thigh gently. "It ain't gonna hurt none, Nertha. It'll be all right."

"I ain't aimin' to have no more kids."

"Now, now, Ma, take it easy."

He swallowed and chewed on his teeth. This was touchy business. He stepped on the foot feed, and hurried the lumbering car along.

Pier followed the road. It zigzagged across the country, a mile north, a mile west. Presently a row of cottonwood treetops rose on the horizon. The trees neared. They rose to the full stature of giant trees. Soon Pier drove the old car beneath their cooling shade. The five-foot trunks cast flickering shadows inside the car.

They rose to the top of a bluff. Before them lay Sioux Falls. Veils of purple smoke trailed high above it. It was a city of pale red rock: pale red store fronts, pale red apartment houses, pale red graveled streets, pale red cement sidewalks. In the glinting sunlight the city glowed pink-purple. Far on the right, on a bluff, the state peniten-

tiary, a long low building also of Sioux quartzite, thrust a phallic smokestack into the sky. Directly ahead a Catholic church tower cut a Gothic silhouette into the western horizon. And to the southwest, mushroomlike trees leaned over residential streets.

The car rumbled down the road. It dropped into a valley. It crossed a rising bridge. Beneath lay tracks and the buckling Big Sioux River.

The car went slowly. Traffic honked and snapped around them. Bewildered, Pier stopped, started again, stopped. A cop hailed them and Pier, frightened, braked hard.

"Where the hell you think you're going, mister?"

Pier unbuttoned a side curtain. "We're lookin' fer the hospital."

"Which one?"

Pier blinked. "Is there more than one?"

"There's three."

"Wal . . . we want the one that fixes up . . . that takes care a female troubles."

"But I ain't aimin' to have no babies," Nertha said.

The cop glanced at her, his eyes opening blue in a beety face. "Uh . . . take the road to your left there. See that building up there? That's it."

"Thanks, mister." Pier buttoned up the curtain and drove left. He was aware that people were staring at his driving.

He bungled past buildings of pale red stone, of beet-red brick.

After a while he arrived before a huge building. A door had lettering over it.

He unbuttoned the curtain again. He beckoned to a stranger idling near a stone pillar. "Where's a feller bring a sick lady?"

The man's brown eyes squinted at Pier. He pointed. "In there. That's the outpatient door."

"Thanks."

Pier shut off the motor, opened the car door. "Come, Ma. We're here. Come."

"But I ain't aimin' to have no more babies."

"Now, Ma, we've come all this way now, so don't spoil it. Besides, you want to feel better, don't you?"

She looked down at her hands.

"Really, Ma."

She suddenly burst into tears.

"Ma. Now."

Crying, she slowly turned in the front seat and slipped past the steering wheel and stepped out. She wept bitterly.

He took her gently by the arm. He led her to the door.

An attendant, slick-haired, saw them coming and opened for them. Seeing the crying farm woman, the man's impersonal face softened. "Right this way. The lady in here'll take care of you."

They sat down on a hard mahogany bench. A stench like aged horse urine smote Pier.

About twenty other people, clad in rough blue clothes and horny-handed, waited too. They sat around like half-finished statues in a sculptor's yard. They stared at Nertha, at Pier.

In the presence of the needling eyes, Nertha abruptly quieted. She rubbed her thumbs against each other.

Pier crossed his legs, hooked his Sunday cap over his knee. He put his hands in the pockets of his new overall. Like a child, his eyes followed moving objects.

Near him sat two women talking. One was very fat, with unwashed, straggly hair. The other was thin, with a bibbering mouth. The fat one was listening sympathetically to the other's wail, occasionally nodding. At last she said, shaking the waddles of flesh around her neck, "Ya, ya. That's the way it goes. Some dries up. An' some, it's yust like they got loose bowels."

A nurse came up. "And what did you come for?"

Pier stood up. He coughed. "Wal, my wife here, she's been poorly lately. Ain't been feelin' so good. Ever since her miscarriage, she——"

"Oh yes," the nurse quickly interrupted. "All right. Just a moment. I think the doctor you want to see is Dr. Norden. Just a moment." The nurse stepped into a room nearby.

"But I ain't aimin' to have no more babies."

"Still now, Ma. It's all gonna be all right."

A man dressed in a white gown came up. A glinting stethoscope tinkled on his hip. He was bald and his eyes were shrewd and black. "Yes?"

"We . . ."

"This way, please."

Pier reached down to help Nertha to her feet. The doctor too reached out a helping hand. Bent forward, her child eyes blank and roving, she shuffled into the doctor's office.

"Here we are. Take a chair. There we are."

Pier and Nertha sat down. Pier put his hands in his pockets. Nertha pulled her dress down over her legs.

"Well now," the doctor began, "well now. And who sent you here?"

"We came of oursel's," Pier said.

"Oh. Well, who's your doctor back home?"

"Dr. Helder."

"Helder?" The bald man's eyes filled with smiles. "Oh sure. I know Dr. Helder. He's a very fine man. A good doctor. What did you say he said was wrong?"

"He didn't say. We came of oursel's."

"But who told you about this place? You see, we must know that for the record."

"Nobody. We just heard they got good doctors here, is all."

"Oh." The doctor placed his finger tips together. "Well, what is it you have in mind? What seems to be your trouble?"

Pier coughed. "Wal, I thought . . . you see, ever since her miscarriage, she's been off her feed."

"Oh." The doctor turned to Nertha. "Were you very ill?"

Nertha said nothing.

Pier offered, "Wal, it was a close call, but God recovered her."

"Oh."

Pier went on. "Anyways, I heard there was some specialists in the city who could fix up a woman that's turned dry."

"Who told you this?"

Pier scuffed the white tile floor. "Wal, to tell you the truth, it was the Old Dreamer. Pederson. The county agent. We was talkin' about the land an' he happened to mention it."

"I see."

A pink glow rose on Nertha's cheeks. "But I ain't aimin' to have no more kids."

The doctor narrowed his eyes. He looked from one to the other.

Pier glared at her.

The doctor stood up. "All right. I tell you, Mr. . . . uh . . . ?"

"Frixen. Pier Frixen. An' she's Nertha." Pier tried to grin. "I sometimes call her Ma."

"All right, Mr. Frixen. You wait outside awhile." He opened the

door. He waved at a slim, white-gowned intake nurse and said, "While I'm examining your wife, this lady will ask you some questions. About your farm, your family, so on."

Pier nodded and stepped outside. He ambled behind the slim nurse. She led him to another office. He found himself admiring the roll of her buttocks as she walked.

She pointed to a chair across from a desk and a typewriter.

Pier sat down.

"Your name?"

"Pier Frixen."

"Your wife's?"

Pier mumbled an answer. Vaguely, as if she were far away, he heard Nertha sneeze loudly. He wondered if her face had again momentarily softened with satisfaction.

"Born?"

"Me? T'Starum. The wife t'Dell Valley."

Carefully, painstakingly, while he played nervously with his cap on his overalled knee, she dug into his work-stiffened mind for facts. "Got a mortgage on your farm?"

"Yeh."

"How much?"

"I don't just exzactly know."

"When did you take it out?"

"In 1919. In the fall."

"How much of a mortgage?"

"On all of it."

The door opened. The doctor entered. "You through with him?" he asked the nurse.

"I guess so. Just about."

The doctor turned his dark eyes on Pier. He said kindly, "I'd like to have a talk with you."

Pier stood up. "She's all right?"

"Oh sure. She's all right. Will you step this way please?"

They walked past Nertha sitting on a chair.

In the doctor's white office, Pier sat down on the edge of a chair.

The doctor swung his armchair around and faced Pier. He asked, "Tell me, do you like your wife?"

Pier crossed his red brows. "Why sure."

"Tell me, when you go to bed, does she seem to get as much out of it as you do?"

Pier fired. He stared angrily at the other. "What's that of yer business?"

The doctor nodded. "I thought so." He looked sadly at the floor. "Well, Mr. Frixen, I'm going to tell you something, something you won't want to hear. In fact, it may make you very angry. But somebody's got to tell you or you are going to be a very sad man someday. Mr. Frixen, you've been cheating your wife ever since your wedding day. You've cheated her out of her fun."

Pier stared.

"You don't understand, I see. Well, let me explain. At the finish, at the end of your fun, you have an explosion, don't you? Well, your wife should have one too."

Pier jumped up. "What fool junk are you tellin' me now?"

"It's the truth."

"Horse collar. Any man knows a woman's not built like a man. Mister, it's you who ain't had his fun."

The doctor shrugged. He turned his chair around. He hummed to himself. He tapped the arm of the chair with a narrow finger. "Well, if that's your attitude, there's nothing I can do for you."

"You ain't fixin' her up then?"

The doctor turned to face him again. His black eyes drilled into Pier. "No. Because it would be wasted. It's you who needs the fixing first."

Pier looked at the other dumfounded. With great effort he contained his anger.

"Mr. Frixen, if you don't treat your wife right, love her up, play with her, help her to her fun, nothing on God's green earth that I say or do will ever help her. It's in your hands." The doctor stood up, went to the door, opened it.

"But—"

"Let me repeat. If you'll give her as much as you get, she'll straighten out again."

Pier fumbled with his cap. "But—"

"I'm sorry."

Pier stepped out of the office. He stood blinking in the waiting room.

Dimly he saw Nertha sitting before him on the chair. She still

drooped. He stepped beside her and took her hand. "Come, Ma. I guess we better go home now."

"But I ain't aimin' to have no more babies."

· 7 ·

In the distant southwest, on the horizon, the mounding thunder-riven clouds massed up against a blue zenith. Creamy folds churned, boiled.

Down the long sides of the monstrous cloud bank deep blue shadows streamed. Far down, almost scraping the earth, the black snake-smooth bottom dragged along, sticking glistering needles of lightning into the pad of earth. Off to one side, a small twister wrote dusty brown lettering upon the palimpsest soils.

Over the falling valleys of the Missouri it came, through the Missouri gorges tortuously along, across the James and Vermillion rivers, across the terrace-like Bench, and on. It glowered over the short valleys and hollows, climbed the slopes north of Sioux City, pushed over the morainal plains west of Beresford, climbed the high loessal uplands near Sioux Falls.

On it came, tumbling, grumbling, stabbing the earth with fire, drenching the atmosphere with fogs. Mizzling sheet rains began to fall, crisscrossing on the horizon. Blasts of wind and water splashed on the tender soils of the old earth.

It came on. It crossed the Big Sioux. The dark shadows of the forehead front loomed darkly. In the homes of the people midafternoon became the dark of night. Lamps were lighted.

Pier stood on his yard and watched. Teo and Nertha came out too. They covered their eyes with raised arms, crooked at the elbow. They peered into the descending, enveloping, eerie gray-cold unnatural dusk.

The northeast winds stilled. Trees straightened up, dumbly waiting for the boxer's blow.

It came. Sudden rude invisible hands wrested bud apples from trees. Coarse fingers sheared leaves from branches like chicken pluckers cleaning feathers from wings. Ditches belched dust. Trees jumped as if gigantic pitchforks had been jammed into their sensitive roots. An enormous cottonwood slowly creaked and cracked and split on its base and toppled to earth. A great shriek rose from its

tearing roots. It fell with a splash of leaves and branches and crushed limbs.

Dime-sized drops splattered, ringing on the roof, on the tin cellar door, pinging on the thin windowpanes.

And fine drops came, by the billions, sheets of mist, penetrating drizzles, pressing through the pinholes, filling vast valleys with tons of crashing water.

Lightning drilled the earth. Powerful electrical charges surged along the wire fencing of fields and pastures, sometimes electrocuting drenched cattle. Telephone lines became alive. Sparks spat from the mouthpieces of telephones.

On the rise east of the house rain fell too. It fell on a soaked earth. It ran. It became a trickle.

An old faded cornstalk, a tough clod of mud, a blade of grass hooked together, became a dam. It held water.

On either side of the dam lay raw ground still open to the skies. On either side sheeting water washed, undermined the dam. Falling rain drenched the hill. New waters slapped against the makeshift dam. It burst. The water bore the old faded cornstalk and the blade of grass and the tough clod of mud down the hill.

The stream grew. Young, powerful, it became reckless. It bumped and shoved and burrowed its way down the hill. It found the little ditch east of the orchard and tumbled into it. With harsh gravels and rolling rough stones, the tawny monster tore its paws into the gentle maternal soils.

The ditch roared with boiling, brown waters. Spreading nets of foam swept toward the culvert.

The culvert choked. It filled with mud and earth and clods and stones.

The monster swelled. No longer could the culvert hold the water. The monster spilled over the lane, dug vicious teeth into the hard ruts cut by wagons and cars and trucks, tore up huge chunks of pavement-hard roadway, tossed them into the orchard.

And beneath the apple trees, the stream found the young gully, and filled it, and overflowed its new raw banks.

It dug at the weeping roots of a young crabapple tree, just twenty feet from the foundation of the house. The chained tree wrestled, tried to escape. But it could not move. Anguished, it struggled.

The stream was relentless. It had no heart. It bore on. It was its own law. It sucked the succulent soils from the grip of the tree's roots. Old black humus, tiny white skeletons of ancient beetles and claw-handed mice, black-and-yellow loess, chunks of leeched-out gravels, rusty stones, specks of blue clay, all were sucked away from the roots.

The roots hung drooping. Weak.

The dying tree flashed its arms once more, with a last fierceness.

But the raging monster was relentless. It tore the tree's placenta out of the earth. The wrenched uterus of the old earth poured black blood.

The young apple tree fell. It toppled into the sudsing angry waters. New leaves, nubbin apples, shiny brown bark, lonely bole, feeble roots, all were borne away. The vicious creature threw the young tree over its back and ran to the river. The monster's feet cut deep into the soft yellow loess.

It kicked privy-sized boulders ahead of its shuffling run.

2. GOD'S GREEN EARTH

. I .

EVERY SHADOW WAS A THREAT. DISASTER LURKED in every passing moment.

Alert, Pier readied himself for the coming blow. Each morning he awoke expecting the worst. The wheeling stars could hardly be expected to spin out two good years in a row. The earth, or Nertha, either one, was sure to give out on him.

His feelings about both were often mixed. Sometimes he loved them; sometimes he hated them.

He loved Nertha for what she once was, a lovely green-eyed virgin. He loved her for what she could be, a smiling mother of many red-haired sons.

He hated her for depressing him, for burdening his spirit with her broken will. It was a grievous task to brighten her eye each day. And the weary aching that was in her craking voice was loathsome to his thundercloud spirit.

The earth he loved for the crops she brought him. He loved her for being a young virgin who played at the endless game of hard-to-get.

The earth he hated for sometimes unaccountably failing to bear him fruit. It was a heartache to know that her virginal, loessal womb had never been completely his.

Ae, sometimes, sometimes the pursuit irked him, rubbed him raw. Sometimes he toyed with the idea of quitting the temperamental land. He longed for a world where the woman would be safe in her place forever.

Peace. To have peace. Quiet. Rest. To be shed of worry and sorrow. Ae, an idle dream.

June came cool. The grain and the hay and the sweet-smelling white clover flourished.

July opened with a burst of heat, with heavy downpours of rain. The grain reached up its long thin arms to the sky; it thrust up finger-opened clusters of kernels. The corn jumped; Pier could hear it growing in the night, cracking, whispering, lifting; it opened bright flat-sword leaves to the moon.

Pier held his breath all the summer long, and wondered: were blessings to fall upon his land a second year after all? Was the golden day of manna come? All he needed was two good years of luck.

An evening, and Pier and Teo, and Nertha, sat on the porch steps facing the east. The sun behind the house was still high.

Pier's belly was warm with the comfort of a full supper. His shoulder and arm muscles ached deliciously from the long hours of haying alfalfa at the foot of Red Bluff. His mind was full of simple musing on the passing of days.

Nertha sat in the doorway, darning socks and shirts. Sometimes she gazed vacantly over the land, sometimes smiling oddly to herself, working by fits and starts. Twice she stroked an overall of Teo's. It lay over her knee, waiting to be patched.

Teo sat on the lower step, reading a pamphlet.

Pier, sitting on the top step, brooded, smoked, looked into the darkening eastern horizon where the purple-black nightfall was gathering. Presently a flying page caught his eye. "Teo, what's that ye're readin'?"

"Nothin'." Teo shifted his legs.

"Something about fairy tales again?"

"No."

"Uh-huh." Pier fingered his pipe. "Always readin'. Readin'. It's like a fever in y'u."

Teo said nothing.

"Tell me, just what is that ye're nosin' through there?"

No answer.

"Hey!" Pier reached out a sudden hand and shook the boy. "I asked you a question. I'd like to have an answer."

"Huh?"

"You heard me."

"Corn picker."

"Corn picker? You mean a machine that'll pick corn by hand itself?"

Teo held up the pamphlet. "See? There's a picture of it."

"Wal I'll be damned." Pier slid down a step and studied the advertisement. "A corn-pickin' machine. Ho. An' how kin that thing pick corn by hand?"

Teo scrambled up beside Pier and laid the pamphlet over Pier's knee. Excitement steadied his uncertain eyes. "Well, you see, the picker comes along like two fingers, see. Like this. And it pinches the corn ears off the cornstalk just like a wringer on a washin' machine pinches the buttons off a shirt."

"Uh-huh. That's a good idea. The feller what figured that one out had a noodle in his nose."

Teo cleared his throat importantly. He hitched up a falling suspender. "Sure he did. An' then the corn falls into this here dingus here, an' then comes around here, an' comes up, an', plop! there it is in yer wagon."

"H'mm."

"Yeh. Oh, Pa, it's a real machine."

"Where'd you get this here paper here?"

"You mean, this pamphlet?"

"Yeh. Pamph'et."

"At Blacktail's Implement."

"Hey, what was you doin' in that bastard's place?"

Teo drew back. "Oh, just lookin'. He's got a lot a nice machines there."

"He talk much t'y'u?"

"Sure. An' he showed me the machines. He's not a bad guy, Pa."

"Is that so."

"An' he's smart. He's gonna be a rich man someday."

Pier tightened his fingers over the bowl of pipe. "Uh-huh."

"Pa, are we ever gonna get a corn picker? I mean, when our ship comes in again?"

"We? Ho. Never. For hard-up people the ship never comes in. Besides, I ain't so poorly but what I can't pick me my corn by hand yit."

"The machine'll save a lot a time, Pa."

"Save time fer what?"

Teo looked down. The last simmer of momentary joy vanished from his blue-green boy's eyes. "Ain't you interested in savin' yerself a lot a work, Pa?"

"Wal, it all depends."

Teo pulled at his suspender again.

"Seems to me, Teo, you got a lazy streak in you."

Teo's shoulder slumped and the suspender fell down once more. The boy fiddled with the pamphlet.

"Ye're always huntin' fer the easy way to do things."

Nertha looked up. Her eyes lighted up cleanly for a moment. "What's the harm in that, I'd like to know? Life's too full a drudgery as it is."

Pier swung around and snapped, "I thought you didn't like machines?"

"I don't. But I hate work worse."

"Woman, it sounds funny to hear you say that."

Nertha said acidly, her eyes still surprisingly clear, "Don't you recognize yer own argyments, man?"

Pier flushed. "Aw, you wimmen, you don't know beans from buttons. Specially not about complicated things like machines. I shouldn't even be talkin' to you."

"An' I suppose you understand all about rotary saws?"

Pier's face darkened with a cloudburst of rage and blood. Couldn't

she let a sleeping dog alone? Âlde Romke was dead and gone, and that ended it. With difficulty he restrained himself.

He said to Teo, "Boy, you better get this through your wise nose right now. We ain't gettin' no corn picker this year." He puffed on his pipe, found it empty, filled it. "Besides, the idee is crazy. Up to our neck in debt with a mortgage an' then we buy a godalmighty monster machine. No sir."

"Aw, Pa, a machine ain't a monster."

"You don't think so? Look at them there teeth there. Why, it looks like it could even be the invention of the Âlde Han himself."

Teo sighed. For a fleeting second the boy's face resembled exactly the face of his mother.

There was a little too much presumption underlying the sigh, Pier thought, and he snapped, looking steadily at Teo, "What's that? Are you talkin' behind my back?"

"Why . . . no."

"Dammit, don't you ever let me catch you at it either. Or I'll kick you from here to hell an' back."

"Okay, Pa."

Nertha sighed, her shoulders drooped, her eyes became vacant again.

Pier fixed his eyes on her. He looked for some excuse to growl.

There was a squeak and a clang behind the house. Pier listened. And nodded. It was the windmill, creaking away.

"Say, Teo, didn't I tell you to shut off the mill before supper?"

Teo looked sheepishly to one side.

"Didn't I?"

Teo muttered to himself.

"What? What was that?"

"I said, 'I guess I forgot.' "

"Wal, git now then."

Teo moved a little.

The boy moved too slowly for Pier and he scrambled to his feet and aimed a kick at him.

But Teo, looking over his shoulder with a backward glance, alert, dodged the striking foot.

Foiled, Pier yelled, "March! Git!"

Teo ran around the corner of the house.

Pier sat down, puffing, swelling with unexploded emotion.

After a moment Nertha shook her head and said grayly, "Nope, no more babies for me."

"Woman, I'm runnin' this place an' I'm gonna make a man out of him if I have to break his legs."

Nertha said nothing.

A couple of minutes later Teo came around the corner of the house again, dragging his legs.

Pier studied him from head to foot, said, "Say, Teo, I've been lookin' high an' low for my new pincers. You ain't seen it, has y'u?"

Teo sat down and scuffed his feet on the walk.

"Has y'u?"

"I dunno."

"Wal . . ."

Teo stirred uneasily. "Well, I guess I did use it after all. Fixin' the garden fence for Mom."

"Oh. Wal, where'd you leave it?"

Teo lifted his shoulders. "I dunno."

"You don't know? Land alive, Teo, someday, if you ain't careful, you'll lose yerself yit."

Teo looked up, his eyes firm for a moment. "Well, if I do, I'm sure to be around somewhere close, close enough to find myself again."

Pier stiffened.

Then Nertha, who had been leaning against the doorpost, threw back her head and shrilled into the still evening, laughing uncontrollably. Her darning and needles rolled out of her lap.

Pier jumped to his feet, stared at her, picked up his straw hat, strode off, stalking tall and wrathy across the yard.

He entered the barn. And found himself with nothing to do. He glowered at the empty stanchions.

Presently the hot, stifling air in the barn drove him outdoors. Walking across the yard again, his eyes lighted on the binder. It stood waiting near the door of the cornerib where he had rolled it the day before to ready it for the cutting. It reminded him that the grain was ripening.

On impulse he decided to see how the Golden Rain oats was coming along in the little fifty. He stepped through the grove. The blue shadows in the ash and maples were cool on his heated face. The tossing branches lifted dark green leaves over his way.

He stepped to the edge of the field. He leaned over the fence, his

elbow on a fence post. The grass waved at his feet. The setting sun caught his bare, tanned arms and painted them red-gold. He brushed red hair out of his eyes. He shadowed his eyes with his hand. He looked at the summer glory of ripening golden grain before him. The mass of tossing green-gold was as endless as an ocean. He trembled. Ae, it was really a bumper crop. Two days more and he would have it safely in shock.

Cock pheasants crowed in the distance. The song of the mourning dove floated down the evening. It was the wail of the earth, eternally lonesome in the universe.

The scent of the white clover at his feet was like the taste of honey syrup.

A wind from the west arose. It moved. A motion moved through the grain and the grasses. The land was running with the wind.

Far in the distance a train started up. Its steady getaway pounding came to him over the rolling prairies. "Bloom! Bom-boom-boom! Bom-boom-boom!"

He heard a plash in the waves of grain. A bird had dived, striking quarry.

He lingered. He listened to the whisper of the westerly wind in the tresslike grasses and grains; and a dream as sweet and as heavy as fermenting mead rose within him.

The waves in the prairie grass along the fence rolled on, endlessly, unheedful of his admiring eye, rolled on eternally.

Ae, what were troubles here? Ae, the land was sweet with growth. It was a friend. How could he ever have doubted the good intentions of the old lady? Ae.

He opened the lazy man's gate and entered the field. Nodding golden oat heads brushed his belly. Dry kernels popped into his pockets. He snapped off a full head. He drew the stems through his fingers, filling the palm of his hand with a little pile of prickly seed. He roughed them and rubbed them against each other. Gently he blew off the chaff. Fine gleaming kernels lay fat in his hand. He bit one and found the milk in it rich. He rejoiced. Ae, the crop was sure to be a bumper.

He sat on his heels in the oats. For a moment his yellow straw hat was only a darker gathering of shadows among the tossing heads.

He took off his hat. He sat listening. At his feet ants with long

feelers probed in the dark of the deep root world. June bugs crept along clumsily.

He heard a rasping noise. He peered around. One moment he heard the sound coming from behind, the next in front. He turned. He heard it to his left. Then his right. He squinted, searched, in the towering stalks. He swung a little again. He searched. When he swung back to his left again he found it. A hopper. He raised his red brows in surprise. A hopper? He snatched at it and captured it in his palm. The startled insect wrestled frantically inside its sudden prison, tickling him. He opened his hand cautiously and caught its rear legs. On its neck was an irregular marking. The inch-long creature was reddish brown. Instantly he recalled Âlde Romke's stories of the Rocky Mountain grasshoppers, how they had come down from the mountains in great plagues in pioneer days. He recalled the old saw, "Kill a hopper and a hundred'll come to its funeral."

He stood up, shading his eyes with his straw hat, looking to the west. Had this pest come to rob him of his sweet fruits? Âlde Romke had said they came as a cloud, dark and low-hanging. Pier studied the horizon, studied the swirling fiery light of the sun where it was cutting into the earth. But he could see nothing.

He sat down in the grain again. He listened. There it was again. A gnawing rasp. He ran his eyes up and down the slim halm of an oat. Another. In the falling sunlight, in the shadows of the root world, it was hard to find the scourging creature.

He searched. He selected individual stalks, and again and again, hunted through them. Then he found one. Another. Tens. Hundreds. For him who wanted to see, the field was full of them.

He stood up. Were these the stragglers of a hopper cloud already flown over? If they were, another man's hard luck was his good luck. Somewhere on God's green earth some stranger was having sorrow.

As he stepped out of the field, he stopped for one last look. He wondered what he should do. The hoppers were too scattered to be fed poison. And the crop was still a little too green to cut.

He looked once more to the west. The northwest.

And it was almost with relief that he saw, coming down from Gitchie Manitou way, a strange glinting low-flying cloud, more high fog than cloud. The sun shone through it dimly. It cast a moving mile-long shadow across the sky. It glistered and flickered. A distant

moan came to his ears, as of some tornado passing along a distant shore.

The cloud approached his pasture fence. Its forepart dipped. It landed at the edge of the grainfield. The entire cloud of buzzing grasshoppers twisted like a flying snake. It bored into the earth like a corkscrew. It vanished into the grain as if it had never been.

Rooted to earth, Pier watched the far side of his green-gold field become a sudden red-brown. The little monsters had come.

He had a quick vision of slim stems of oats, blooming with lovely heavy breasts, suddenly crumpling under the brown flood of destruction.

A red-brown grasshopper crashed against his overall. It tumbled, fell to his feet. Another hit his cheek. The impact stung. Another hit his eyelid.

Aroused, Pier ran to the house. He swung past the woodshed, ran up the walk to the porch steps. "Hey, Teo! Teo!" he yelled. "C'mon. You got to help me. A plague's come."

Teo leaped up. Nertha jerked up her head, trying to steady her eyes on him.

Pier puffed. His breath coursed hoarsely in his throat. His skin burst with seepings of hot sweat. "A locust plague, Teo. Like in Pharaoh's time. Eatin' my wonderful crop a oats." He rushed into the kitchen, stomping. Over the door hung two shotguns, a 12-gauge, a .410. He took them down. He jumped to the closet under the stovepipe, pulled out two boxes of shells. He ran outdoors again.

"Teo, here. Take the .410."

Nertha's eyes steadied. She raised a hand. "But, Pier. A gun for the boy?"

"You bet yer Sunday boots."

"But a gun?"

"Woman, we need to blast all hell out a them bastards or we'll all be stone-broke this fall."

"But a gun?" She stood up, put a hand on his arm.

"A-raach!" He pushed her aside violently. She fell against the porch screen.

"Pier——"

"Woman, givin' him a gun don't mean he kin keep it forever." He turned to Teo. "Here. Take it. Load it. An' we'll make all hell pop loose fer them devils."

Nertha covered her face. "My boy. He'll never come back alive an' in one piece."

"Woman, do you think I'm gonna stand by, sucking my thumb? Let my hard-earned money go up in smoke?" Pier started down the walk. "Come, boy. We'll give them buggerin' bastards something they'll never forget." Pier slipped a shell into the 12-gauge.

Excited, Teo uncocked his gun, loaded it, snapped it to. He caught up with Pier. Together they ran across the yard.

Cursing, brandishing his gun, Pier charged through the grove. With Teo close behind, he popped through the north side, wheeled, jumped over the lazy man's gate on the ground, pushed through the breast-tall grain, holding his gun aloft. Sometimes wind-crossed straws caught at his feet. He stumbled, gained his balance. Teo followed close behind.

"Don't cock yer gun yit, boy," he shouted.

"No," Teo panted.

They neared the edge of the battlefield. Already the red-brown devils had eaten a strip a dozen feet wide. Desolation was rapidly moving into the green-gold.

Pier noticed Teo lagging behind. "What's the matter?"

"Got one in my eye." Teo was rubbing his face. The boy caught at one climbing through his hair, looked at it. "Hey, Pa, these are the worst there are. They got a *W* on their forehead."

"You tellin' me?"

In the fading sunset the red-brown bodies of the migratory monsters glistened sinisterly. All around was the sound of gnawing, chewing, like sewing machines running wild.

Pier plunged into the midst of them. In an instant he was covered by the maggoty devils. "C'mon, Teo," he shouted, closing his eyes against the flooding vermin, "blast the hell out of 'em." Even as he spoke, locusts popped into his mouth. His closing teeth crushed one. A fierce taste of putrefaction soured his tongue. The creature nipped his palate. He spat. Reeling, he lifted his gun and shot into the mass. He loaded and shot again. Grasshoppers crawled over the stock, over the barrel, into the barrel. Feverishly he loaded and shot again. Vaguely, as if miles away, he heard another gun go off. He shot and blasted and staggered through the sloppy mass.

When he had emptied his pockets of shells, the blanketing horde of slippery beasts still beat against his tightly closed eyelids. They

beat against his cheeks and lips. They wrestled in his clothes. They tickled and scratched and itched in his underwear.

He turned and ran. "Teo! Teo! C'mon, we can't lick 'em this way."

He ran for the fence. Vaguely he heard Teo's feet padding beside him. Their gun barrels clinked together. Pier puffed. He was soaked with sweat.

An incoming breath sucked up a locust into his left nostril. He sneezed. He snorted. He grabbed at his itching nose and almost wrenched it off to rid himself of the scratching devil. A swelling enormous breath dislodged it, carried it into his throat. He fell down, coughing, gasping. Great coughs tossed his body. He blasted coughs to rid the clawing little monster from his windpipe. Another cough, and it shot against the roof of his mouth, wriggling. With a violent, disgustful movement of his tongue he spat it forth.

A voice sounded near his ear. "Y'u all right, Pa?"

Pier nodded. He didn't dare look out. He jumped to his feet again. Still the red-brown devils pursued him, crawling into his ears, over his arms, into his shoes. They were as many as water. He ran blindly toward the grove.

He rammed into the fence. Like rubber bands, the barbwires tossed him back on his hams. Blinking, he looked up, and was surprised to see that, except for a few darting H' beasts on the front of his overall, he had left the plaguing devils behind. He coughed. He looked around, stood up.

Seeing Teo look strangely at him, he asked, "What's so funny?"

The boy pointed. "Your hat."

Pier reached up and found only the leather rim of it circling his head. Its straw had vanished. Swearing in astonishment, Pier threw the band aside. He combed a few hoppers out of his red hair.

He thinned his lips. He faced the slowly advancing, devouring horde.

He thought of something. He raised a wetted finger to the air. The wind was still west, and it was very light. It could be done. A man could let a fire start slowly up the field, at least far enough to burn the horde, and then stamp it out. If he didn't try it he would lose the field anyway. Wouldn't hurt to try. "Teo, I got me an idee." Still combing hoppers from his hair, he crawled through the fence,

Teo after him. "Boy, go back an' get us a couple a forks. Old ones. We're gonna fry the bastards."

Teo laid his gun on the ground, crawled through the fence, and legged it like a fleeing jack rabbit.

Pier ran down along beside the pasture lane. He rounded the end of the field where the grasshoppers had first lighted. He gathered up a handful of dry stalks. He bunched them. He sat on his heels, his back to the wind. Cautiously he lighted a match on the rough surface of an overall button. It flashed flame. He held it in the bunching of straws. A small curl of white smoke rose. A burst of flames crackled at his feet. Raw-handed, he grabbed up a smoldering handful and tossed it into the grain. The flames hesitated, flutted, caught, flared up.

Teo came up, climbed through the fence. Grabbing a fork, Pier scattered faggots across the end of the field, toward the north. Teo worked south. They built an ever lengthening series of flame nests. Soon the spots of fires widened, connected, became a slow wall of fire. Locusts began to fry with a popping sound.

But then the weak breeze died, and in a few moments, the wall of fire broke apart, and dimmed, and funked out.

Breathing wildly, sweating, staring, Pier stopped to rest a moment. He leaned on a fence post. "No use, Teo. No use."

Teo stood by, panting too. A hopper crawled in the boy's blond hair.

"No use. I guess we kin kiss the oats crop good-by." Pier rubbed his leathery cheek.

Teo leaned on his fork, nodding, breathless.

Pier stirred. He hated to give up. He looked over the little fifty. In the evening's dusk, the green-gold had become a deep gray-green. He gathered his tired muscles together. "Teo, there's only one thing left. That's to cut it. Go get the horses."

Teo's eyes opened. "You gonna cut at night?"

"Yip. That's it." Pier glanced at the east. "There'll be a full moon along pretty soon."

"But you still ain't greased the binder, Pa."

"I know. But I kin manage that in the dark." He wiped his brow. "Wal, what're you waitin' fer? Git them horses."

Like a calf with broken shins, Teo jogged down the pasture.

It was purple dusk when Pier had the binder ready. The canvases were on and tight, two balls of twine were spliced together and tied into the needle, and the oil holes running. Before the binder, harnessed and hitched up, stood the blacks and grays.

Teo said, "Too bad you ain't got a tractor, Pa. You could cut all night."

Pier said nothing.

"A tractor'd never get tired."

"Huh."

"A pop-up would be just the thing."

"Teo, I ain't got time for gossip. Get a move on with that extra drive line."

"Okay."

Pier clambered up on the machine. He glanced around, looked down into the works. It was ready. He opened his hands and caught the lines from Teo. With a sucking sound under his palate, "Gluckt. Glickt. Giddap there, boys," he started up.

In the dark, the horses leaned forward. Traces tightened. The groaning wheels rolled. The binder, heavy on one side, swung left, then straightened.

"Throw out them bundles, boy. Just as soon as I make it around, I'll help."

Teo nodded.

Pier could hardly see the boy. He wondered what thoughts were stirring and leaping in his child's mind. "Be careful, lad."

"I will."

Bareheaded, Pier drove the heavy machine through the grove. Low-hanging branches of ash and maple came toward him. He grabbed a few, lifted them, passed underneath. He drove through the opened gate.

The machine barreled into the little fifty. He turned left, throwing the cutting platform against the fence, driving the horses and the binding section into the tall grain.

The ponderous bull wheel, which powered the binder, crushed the fragile grain beneath it into a flat mat of straw. Its powerful thrusting lugs gripped the earth. It seemed to be turning the rolling ball of the earth beneath it. Pier reached down and threw the switch. Instantly a roar loosed beneath his seat. The machine lurched to the left. The drive shaft hammered. The sickle whined and scissored

through the waiting, rustling, gray-gold grain. The horses jumped, ran a few steps, flipping up inquiring ears, forth and back, then quieted, adapting themselves to the pound and grind of harvesting.

Dark descended around them. The horses were moving blots of black. The white arms of the great reel wheel, stroking the grain onto the platform, waved in the pressing darkness like the ghostly arms of a turning Frisian windmill. Beneath, in the works, chains chortled and churned, rattled over the whirling sprocket wheels. The machine on the back of the bull wheel rose and fell over the bults and hollows of the land.

Like piercing, flashing flints, Pier's eyes picked out the way along the fence. In the night gray-black, the wooden poles were spectral stalks of bone gray. Shifting nervously on his hard steel seat, Pier drove carefully along.

Nearing the line where the brown scourge was ascending the slope, he swung north, cutting just ahead of it. He hurried the horses along. Grimly he hoped that thousands of the devils were dying on the sickle, that it was greasy with their severed bodies.

A pheasant rocketed out of the grain ahead. The moment it rose above the line of the horizon, it streamed gold in the starlight. It soared. Its flight blotted out white-sharp stars.

He hurried. He approached the northwest corner of the field. To his surprise he saw that at this point the gold-green oats extended all the way to the fence. He swung to his left. The veering horses and bull wheel trampled down hundreds of slim stems.

The bulky machine drove through the grain like a tugboat. He was on a night sea of tossing golden green. Waves of grain reflected starlight. And all around fireflies flashed like miniature meteors.

He drove up the north side of the field, rising with the land to the top of the low slope. Red Bluff hove up ahead. It was the hump of an enormous sleeping beast.

Pier topped the rise, turned south again, heading for the yard.

Carefully he watched the fence posts striding toward him. The machine just grazed them.

The horses plodded on, steadily, unvaryingly, powerfully. Their rumps rose and fell before him like the pistons of an enormous engine.

The scissoring sickle whistled in the grain. The tender stems, laden with heavy seed, fell over, were brushed by the revolving

reel wheels onto the platform. The severed grain slid sibilantly along the hissing canvases, moved up under his feet, moved down, fell into the packers, became wadded tight together, built up into a bundle. A needle came flashing out of a side hole and, like a darting spider, imprisoned the helpless stems with twine. A nickel knotter whirled out, danced, tied the knot, vanished. Two strong prongs flailed around, slammed the bundle down, tossed it onto the bundle carrier below. More bundles came. One, two, three, four.

Pier pulled up his foot. The trip pedal, buckled to his feet, came up hard. The carrier swung down, fell to one side, and the burden slid to earth.

He finished the round, turned the horses, lined them up for the second round, shouted "Whoa," and, even before the chains ceased rattling, hit the earth.

He ran back along the path of the bull wheel, catching up the strewn bundles as he went, tossing them against the fence. The path of the binder would be clean before he started his second round. There would be no bundle-fouled sickle while he was binding.

In the close air of the dark night, he sweat profusely. His wet clothes dragged at his limbs. The night was so dark it was like working in a world of soot.

He neared Red Bluff. He tossed bundles to his right, against the fence. One, two, three, four. He ran on. Tossed.

In the dark, he bumped against Teo. He jumped. "Hey. That you, Teo?"

"Yeh," the boy gasped, staggering and falling into the grain.

Pier was instantly gentle. "I didn't hurt you, boy?"

"No. Just kind a knocked me down."

Pier knelt. "You sure ye're all right?"

"Yep."

"Good. Come. We got to hurry." Pier stood up again, and turned, and started a slow run back toward the binder. He followed the bull-wheel track along.

He had run a few rods when he remembered something. He stopped. When Teo caught up to him, he said, "Say, Teo, by God, y'u sure did good to get this far along. It's better than any hired hand would a done, I kin tell you that."

Embarrassed, Teo looked to one side. Despite the night's gloom, Pier could see the boy's eyes firing.

Again Pier ran on, leaving the boy behind. Coming to the binder, he climbed it, grabbed up the lines, started up the horses. "Gluckt. Glickt. Git along there, boys! Git!" Once again the huge machine tuned up, and groaned, and rolled and swayed over the field.

He urged the horses along.

Halfway toward Red Bluff, the horses raised inquiring ears and shied to one side. "Hey, what the devil?" Pier muttered. He leaned far over to one side, peering into the globules of dark. "Oh. It's you, Teo. Good. Thought fer a minute . . . Say, boy, kin you run an' git me a jug a water?" he shouted. "I'm cuttin' this green stuff till hell freezes over."

The boy nodded, and vanished.

The bungling, rumbling machine ground on. It thundered sullenly over the uneven sward. The sickle scissored, the head bound, the bundle carrier dumped. Grain fell.

The third time around, Pier saw the eastern sky beginning to lighten. Purple became blue, blue became gray, gray became silver-pink. A film-thin wisp of cloud lighted up red like a filament in a radio tube. A moment later, out of an inflamed horizon, a bloody moon was born. Like a just-awakening calf, it tried to raise its head out of the earth. It struggled. It rose a little. It parted from the earth. It gathered its dripping legs together and curled itself up into a golden ball and, circling, ascended the sky.

And the grain, the waving oat ocean, became gold, became orange. Red luminous shadows glowed at the feet of the stalks, in the root world.

The line of the standing grain became clear-cut, a waving gold beside a silvery expanse of stubble.

A pheasant flew up. The horses reared in their harnesses. Maid tried to run. With sure fingers, Pier steadied her. The clattering brattle of the binder, momentarily raised to a whining moan, fell again, and leveled to a steady droning.

The rounds went by. The windrows lengthened across the field. The cut swaths multiplied. The rings of the bull-wheel tracks tightened around the uncut center, moved in, closing, narrowing.

He stopped near the yard to rest the horses and to oil the machine. In one of the windrows a few bundles seemed oddly piled, as if human hands had thrown them together. He went over, and found lunch and a pail of coffee. Nertha had brought them. Ah! Good

girl, he thought. Good girl. He munched on the sandwiches, gulped the coffee. He oiled. He brushed brown hoppers off his arm and sweat-wet shirt.

The moon rose. Pier's bared head glowed a mellow rust.

At midnight, he found Teo still shocking. Pier stopped and called out, "Hey, Teo."

"Yeh?"

"You better go to bed now, boy." The night was so still ordinary speech was a yell.

"Okay, Pa." The boy came up the windrow, moving up out of the silvery moon-dusk.

"Tired, boy?"

"No. Not much."

"Really?"

"Well . . . to tell you the truth, I'm so tired my bones are ready to fall out."

"I thought so. Better go home. Like I said."

Teo drew closer. "Well, Pa, what do you think, will we win?"

"I dunno." Pier twisted in his steel seat, looking away from the menace. "I ain't looked yit an' I ain't gonna." Pier had an impulse to light his corncob pipe but repressed it. Though the wind was down, it was still a good thing to keep in the habit of playing safe. He considered chewing a handful of tobacco, but rejected that as a dirty habit. He turned and faced ahead again. "Wal, I'll be cuttin' all night, boy, an' on into the morning. Y'u'll do the chores tomorrow?"

"Sure."

"Good."

Teo started for home, hesitated, looked up at Pier again. "Say, Pa, I think I'm gonna have a look at them hoppers, though."

Pier shrugged. "If you wanna, go ahead."

Teo leaned into an awkward run. His clumsy legs carried him away into the dark with surprising swiftness.

Pier looked up at the stars and the moon. The lad was sure to find nothing but pestilence and devastation.

Pier started up the horses. "Gluckt. Glickt. Git, boys, git. Giddap."

Puffing, rumps spitting air, the horses bulged into the drawbar again.

Pier had just turned the southeast corner when the outside horse jumped. Looking, Pier saw a creature bounding toward him from the west through the tall grain. "Whoa," Pier sang out. He leaned forward, peering.

A voice, shrill and high, rang. "Pa! Pa! They're gone!"

Pier stiffened.

The creature drew close. Teo, breathless, suddenly pushed his face up beside Pier's thigh. In the moonlight the boy's eyes were pools of swimming green. "Pa. Pa. They're gone. All of 'em."

"Aw, now, boy——"

"But they are. All of 'em. I saw it. I run all over an' they're gone. The whole kaboodle shebang."

"No!"

"They are."

"Wal, I got to see that! Jumpin' Joseph! Kid, hop on behind there. We're ridin' now." Pier lifted the lines and snapped them over the backs of the grays and blacks. "Git, you devils, git! Glickt!"

The horses worked up into a trot. The binder roared. The canvases snapped on the cutting platform.

In a moment they were around the field. "Whoa!" Pier shouted. And even before the horses could stop, he was bounding down a windrow toward the west fence.

In the moonlight he saw it. Somehow, as mysteriously as they had come, the *W*-headed monsters had vanished. The earth had swallowed them.

He couldn't understand it. He scratched his bare head. "It's a wonder. It's like suddenly gettin' butter in the bone soup when y'u didn't have fat to begin with."

. 2 .

Saturday night, and the sun downing. The family sat munching around the supper table. Muscles ached from the summer's burning. Haggard eyes barely glimpsed the mounds of food on the spread plates.

Into the silence Pier insinuated his voice. "Wal, I guess we all oughta go to town tonight, huh, Ma?"

Nertha's child eyes brightened. "Town? Why . . . I suppose yes. Sure."

"Got yer shoppin' list ready?"

"Yes."

"Does it say I got a new straw lid comin'?"

"Yes, it does."

"Then ye're ready?"

"Why, yes." Nertha stood up and brushed her dress down over her hips. "Though I still gotta change clothes, of course."

"Sure thing." Pier nodded. He looked at Teo. "Wal, boy, got them eggs packed in the egg case yit?"

Teo bolted the rest of his food and stood up. "Yip. An' I got a half pail extry."

"Good boy. Y'u must a been huntin' good this summer."

"I did, Pa. I did. I even hunted in the gopher holes."

"Ho!" Pier laughed. "Wal, better stack them dishes, huh, Ma?"

"Oh no. I hate to come home to a house full a dirty dishes. No, Teo kin help me quick a minute."

Pier smiled. He stood up and filled his pipe. He lighted it. He puffed contentedly a moment and looked out of the window. "Wal, we got a lot a time yit. No hurry. Stores'll be open till one tonight. Most people won't get there till nine anyways."

Pier stalked across the kitchen, got out his white crock mug and brush, his black-handled razor. He stroked the razor a few times over a leather hone, *sa-slick*, *sa-slick*, *slick*. He ran the edge over a fingernail, found it spider-thread thin. He slopped a little hot water in the mug, fluffed up lather, slapped and dabbed it over his face. He rubbed it in, held a hot towel over his leathery cheeks, lathered again. Slowly he scraped the keen blade over his beard-tough skin. *Scrretch, scrretch, etch.*

Behind him Nertha and Teo rushed about in the house, washing dishes, sweeping up the kitchen floor, changing clothes.

Soon they were all in the family car: Pier and Nertha in the front seat, Teo in back. The boy's knees were down on the floor, his head and arms over the back of the front seat.

They ascended the slow rise east of the farm, turned north at the corner. Crisscrossing bands of lemon-bright car headlights cut the summer evening's purple horizons. Stars gleamed. In the west, the planet of love glowed yellowly in a luminous blue.

Suddenly as they rode along there was a splash of flaming saffron far above. The world glowed. Light brighter than day burst around them. The road and the poles, the fields and the scattered trees, came up clearly out of the pink-blue dusk.

Wondering, puzzled, Pier braked the car, slowed, stopped. "Now what's louse?" He looked at the others. The idling motor barely murmured.

They too echoed his surprise, his fear. For the first time in months the sick lines in Nertha's face were gone. Her face was sweet with amaze. Teo sat with wide blue-green eyes. Dressed in his Saturday-best blue overall, the boy's hair seemed orange.

A great roaring, loud but far away, a vast distance beyond the earth, droned upon them, pressed them down. Then an explosion, an ear-cracking detonation, blew up in the heavens. Astral streams of white-yellow spilled over all. Then darkness. Vast. Deeper than night. All silence.

Teo was first to stir. "Meteor?"

"Huh?" Pier raised red brows.

"Yeh. Meteor. A star fallin'."

Pier waggled his head wonderingly. "Whatever it was, was mighty."

Nertha nodded, her eyes laggard again. "It was of the Lord," she murmured. "Of the Lord. A sign of doom for somebody."

"Doom? Aw, fiddlesticks, woman, what are you talkin' about? Old woman's talk, that's all." He shrugged uneasily. He put the car in gear, stepped on the foot feed, started rolling again. He shook his head. "Fiddlesticks."

Vividly came to mind Âlde Romke's story of the bursting star which had foretold the destruction of the sweet land of Friso. And the destruction had come. Great hungry waves from the North Sea had engulfed the collapsing land, had swallowed up the great city of Starum and the forest Kacil. Many thousands of Frisians had been plunged forever into dead sleep.

Pier looked over his shoulder. Red Bluff loomed up on his left. That mighty bult, he felt, would never be swallowed by a sea.

The road fell away into Blood Run Valley. It turned right into Starum. The street lights of the country town were on.

Pier picked his way cautiously down the main street. The parking spaces were full. He went up a short street, circled the block,

tried again. The sidewalks were jammed with folk, smiling, talking, nodding, exclaiming, gossiping. Knots of red-faced men clogged the doors of the Beer & Billiard, the implement shop, the harness shop. Clusters of women dressed in red-and-pink and green-and-blue print dresses blocked the doorways of the Starum Mercantile.

Above the tumble of his motor Pier heard the drum of a band tuning up. "Wal, some of the band-playin' boys must a come to town tonight."

"I saw the Brandt boys go by," Teo said.

"Uh-huh. Wal, that's it then. Say, Ma, I can't find noplace to park. You get off here. An' I'll park me the car in front a the bandstand."

Her eyes cleared. She hesitated.

"Wal?"

"Oh, I kin walk from there. Go ahead."

Pier nodded. He shifted the car into second gear to get a new start, built up a little speed, wove through the square, took the motor up into high gear again. He drove easily, rolling the steering wheel in his harsh, calloused hands.

He found an open space directly in front of the bandstand.

Built of pine and painted a garish white, the stand gleamed beneath hooded lights. Swarms of bugs circled the electric-light bulbs. Ten of the fifteen chairs set out for the players were occupied. Brown, muscled forearms glowed mellowly in the light. The white shirts made the blue overalls seem black. Eyes flashed. A long-legged girl walked by and one of the boys touched her. She jumped, dimpling. She kicked at him like a frisky heifer. The young bulls lifted their heads and bayed.

"You gonna sit here?" Pier asked.

"Oh. No." Guiltily she gathered her dress up and opened the door and stepped out. She hesitated. "You'll bring the eggs then?"

"Sure." Pier nodded.

She left, and Teo clambered over the front seat and sat beside Pier.

Pier's fingers itched. He wished he had his accordion with him. He recalled songs from the phonograph. One of them he would play:

Dance, gypsy, play, gypsy,
Sing while you may.

Teo tugged at his arm. "Kin I . . ." The boy swallowed.

"Kin y'u what?"

"Oh . . . nuthin'."

Pier knew something was coming, so he said, "G'wan, go play with the boys. Jimmy. Go on."

"Well, I will. Pretty soon."

"Wal, what do you want?"

"I thought maybe you'd go see that corn picker, Pa. Just."

"I don't wanna see no corn picker, boy. No."

Teo resettled beside him.

"Whyn't you go play with the kids? The town's full of brats. Runnin'. An' take the eggs to the store."

Teo got out of the car. With downcast eyes, he opened the back door and got out the eggs, both the case and pail. Slowly he started down the street.

Pier slid down in the seat, relaxing. Musing, his eyes half closing with reverie, he watched the players tuning up. He heard a trombone blatting, a saxophone shrilling, a horn tootling.

Soon a quick-stepping man climbed the three steps onto the bandstand, wheeled, climbed on the podium. Instantly the players snapped straight in their chairs. The man was the conductor. On alternate Saturday nights, he directed the bands of Starum and of Philosophy, South Dakota.

In a few minutes a Sousa strain throbbed in the night air. Pier followed the beat of it with a tapping finger on the brown wood of the steering wheel.

A hand reached into the touring car. It landed with a whack on Pier's shoulders. "How the hell are y'u, you old skate, huh?"

Pier coughed and sat up. "Oh. Red Joe. Hi. Take a load off yer feet an' sit down."

"Don't mind if I do." Red Joe walked around the car, opened the door, got in. "Well, you old goat, how goes it? Still eatin' tin cans?"

"Yeh," Pier grunted. He raised his voice to make it carry through the drumming music of the band. "Say, look at that snare drummer there. Kin he handle them sticks. Jumpin' Joseph. That guy's got fingers quicker'n cricket."

"Yeh."

"Sure kin hit that hide, can't he? Yessir. He's good."

Red Joe said, "Say, did you see that star bustin' tonight?"

"See it?" Pier slapped the steering wheel. "Why, it came whizzin' right over the radiator cap of my car there. Almost smack dab inta my face."

"That's funny. I was sloppin' the hogs an' it just about caught me in the seat a my pants. Just as I was bendin' over for another pailful."

"Huh."

Red Joe said, "I see you been cuttin' grain?" Red Joe's eyes were covert.

Pier nodded. "Yeh. Finished shockin' today."

"Lucky dog."

"Lucky? Not when I had to cut it green, I ain't." Pier rustled through his pockets for pipe and tobacco.

"Ye're still lucky." Red Joe hunted through his pockets too and at last found a plug of tobacco. He blew off bits of dust from the raw, brown edges and cracked off a bite with his brown-stained teeth. Chewing slowly, he spat out a few more grains of pocket dirt. "Maybe you don't know it, man, but luck's growin' in yer shoes."

Pier shut his mind to the band for a moment. "How do you figger?"

"Ain't y'u heard? Why, man, every farmer from here to Squaw Tit's been complainin' about the danged barberry rust."

"Rust?"

"Yeh. Redder'n blood. The oats is just shellin' off. The least wind an' all y'u have left standing in the field is stalks a straw."

"Maybe it's the Russian Green oats that's doin' it."

"Hell no. It's all the oats. Golden Rain, Albion. All of it."

Pier was reluctant to accept the good news. "But I'd still ruther have a little rust than shriveled oats. Which is what mine is. Cut it too quick."

Red Joe regarded him narrowly a moment, then laughed. "I'll be cow-kicked by a mule. Pier, ye're a case all right. Actin' like ye're hit hard when you know you got it lucky."

"No, I—"

"Oh, c'mon, man. Admit it. Ye're just achin' to rub it in that y'u got the best of us again."

"No, really—"

Teo came running up. "Pa!"

Pier turned. "Now what?"

"Say, Pa. I saw that corn picker, an' is it ever a honey."

Pier wagged his head. He turned to Red Joe. "Yer kid teasin' you about a picker too?"

"Yeh."

"Damn kids." Because someone outside the family was present, Pier tempered his impatience with the boy. "Now look, boy. Don't come botherin' me every other minute about that fetch-stickin' corn picker. I ain't got the money, I'm busy talkin' to my neighbor here, an' I'm listenin' to the band. So git. March."

Teo crossed and uncrossed his legs. He kicked at the dry grass beneath the running board. His slim, hard fingers gripped the edge of the front door.

"Go. March."

"Well, Pa, if I can't have a corn picker, kin I have a watch?"

"A watch? What fer that?"

"To tell the time, a course. When I'm shockin' in the field. I never know when it's time to start chorsin'."

"I kin tell you that."

"Ya, but I still want a watch, Pa."

Pier stirred uneasily. The boy had really earned a watch the past week. Pier rubbed his chin. Besides, he didn't want Red Joe to think him a cheapskate. "Wal, all right. How much?"

"A dollar."

"What kind a watch is it?"

"Ingersoll. A real crackajack of a watch."

"Here."

Teo took the dollar, gulped, sprang away like a jack rabbit.

Pier chuckled. "Danged kid. But still at that he's been a cheap hired hand."

· 3 ·

It was a mild day in middle August.

Threshing was finished. Plowing and fence-fixing time lay ahead.

For two days Pier had lazed around the yard, resting up from the grinding toil of getting up every morning at four and going to bed at ten. And now the third day, napping on his horsehair sofa after dinner, he felt an urge to be up and going again.

He craved excitement. He wished the county fair at Rock Falls were on. Or a roaring carnival at Starum.

He toyed with the impulse to spend the afternoon gossiping with

Red Joe, but when he thought of Edna's weary tones, he rejected it. He was tired enough of seeing Nertha's melancholy eyes.

He wished Âlde Romke were alive. The old man would have been full of suggestions on how to spend a lazy day. The old man would probably have spent it on the bank of the river, fishing, drinking beer, and retelling the glories of the Frisians in the olden days.

Or the old man would have spent it picking wild grapes. He loved to make wine from them.

Pier blinked. That was it. Pick grapes. It was a shame to let all those millions of wild grapes along the Big Sioux go to waste. It would make good jelly. And wine. Many a time, when he had gone hunting or fishing along the banks of the river, when he was a young man, he had stripped a cluster with two fingers, filling his mouth with the biting fruit. In the sun the blue juice had bubbled goldenly over his fingers.

Pier lay easy, lay lazy on the humped sofa. He stretched his legs, wiggled his toes inside his cotton socks. He let the idea of the grape hunt grow in his mind.

It would be a relief to get away from Nertha for a day. It would be a good thing too to spend an afternoon playing with the boy. Except for the fight against the locusts, the boy had been listless the last few weeks. He seemed to be growing away from him.

Pier sat up and swung his feet to the floor. He lifted a shoe, smelled it, wrinkled his nose, drew it on. He pulled on the other. He stalked to the kitchen. He saw Nertha gazing vacantly out of the north window. He asked, "Know where Teo is?"

"Out on the yard somewhere," she said, not stirring.

"Uh-huh." Pier looked at her, hurried out of the door. What an ugly hag she was getting to be.

He picked up his new straw hat from the table on the porch. He puzzled a moment at the printed trade-mark on the brown leather sweatband; then, scooping his wild red locks up in one hand, clapped it on.

"Teo! Oh, Teo!"

No answer. The yard was silent.

"Teo!"

There was a movement in the weeds north of the chicken coop. A second later Teo's head popped up. "What?"

Pier studied the boy. "Hey, what's goin' on there?"

"Nothing." Teo looked down at his feet. He shambled slowly toward Pier.

"Huh? What's goin' on there?" Again Pier was struck by the boy's resemblance to the Nertha he once had known. He couldn't make up his mind if he liked it or resented it.

"Oh, I was just huntin' through the junk pile fer stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Oh, stuff."

"Uh-huh. You know, boy, ye're sure havin' a hard time gettin' them machines out a yer head, ain't y'u?"

Teo scuffed his toes on the wheel-hardened yard.

"When's the last time I bought you a pair a shoes?"

Teo's foot stilled.

"Wal, son, I tell you what. I been thinkin' we ought to go on a picnic."

Teo lifted green-blue eyes.

"Yeh. I been thinkin' we oughta go nosin' through the river bottom to see what we kin find."

"When?" Teo asked, straightening.

"Wal, don't you think now is as good a time as any? Tell you what, you go get up the trotters from the pasture, an' we'll drive as far as we kin with the democrat."

"Okay, Pa." Teo raced away in a whirl of awkwardly pumping bones.

They drove west along Blood Run Creek.

Teo asked, "What's them sacks fer, Pa?"

Pier smiled. "Oh, you'll see."

"Gonna catch bears?"

"Huh. You know there ain't no bears around here."

"Wolves?"

"No."

"Anything I know, Pa?"

"Yep. You've eaten it already."

"Betcha it's rabbits."

Pier shook his head, still smiling.

"Eagles?"

Pier scoffed. "Eagles!"

"Well, Jimmy says he saw one already."

"Huh. He probably just seen a big hawk. Or a horned owl."

"No, he says it was a bigger bird than that. A big one."

"Yeh, sure."

Teo pushed a forelock out of his eye. He sat on the edge of the seat. He pointed to the trotters. "Kin I drive 'em, Pa?"

"These wild ones? I should say not."

"They're pretty old and tame now, Pa."

"Wal . . . but these critters, they've never got over bein' wild."

"Aw, I know I kin hold 'em."

"Son, there ain't nobody what kin drive these wild devils. They ain't safe fer nobody but their master. Me."

"Let me try."

Pier glanced at the boy. Reluctantly he held out the lines. "You gotta hold 'em steady now."

"Sure, Pa."

"Huh. I'll just betcha them two will know the second you touch the lines."

Teo gripped the lines firmly.

And, just as Pier predicted, the boy had no more than touched the leather reins when sly-eyed Daise swung around, trying to see past her blinder. Her pace increased. Gravel bits sprayed up behind the wheels. The tall weeds growing in the seldom-used trail whipped against the bottom of the democrat. Then fiery Queen noticed something wrong. She pricked up both ears. Sprang. The springboard buggy began to buck.

"Hey," Pier shouted. "I guess that's enough." He snatched the lines from the boy. With a mighty pull he gradually slowed down the speeding bays. "See," he said, puffing, breaking into a sweat, "see, I told you."

Teo mumbled, crestfallen.

Pier pursed his lips. "Don't feel bad about it, boy. There ain't another man in the county what could hold them. You were tryin' to do more than a man's job."

Teo lifted a wary eye.

"Sure. Red Joe tried to drive 'em one day. An' they just about got away."

"Oh."

"Sure, boy. You did fine."

Teo sniffed, looked around for something to say. His eyes sud-

denly sharpened. He pointed. "Hey, Pa, look. There's a badger."

A yellow-gray creature, more like a flat round stone than an animal, skimmed swiftly over the ground.

"Sure enough," said Pier.

"Is that what we're goin' after?"

Pier grinned. "No. Not that."

They drove along. The lane became weedy with sunflower and wild hemp. A gate hove up ahead.

"All right, son. You hop out an' open that gate."

"Okay." Teo leaped out of the rolling democrat, was running before he hit the earth.

Pier drove through. Teo closed the gate after.

Cottonwood and white willow grew on the dry bosses and knolls before them. Locoweed and porcupine grass, dangerous to cattle, blotched the drying grassland. A patch of yarrow flourished on an ancient Mound Builder's mound.

They rolled down toward the valley. The democrat bounced over cow piles and badger digouts.

Absently Pier noticed Old Dreamer Pederson's five-acre place a quarter of a mile to the north. It lay across Blood Run Creek, with a spur road tying it to the Starum-Sioux Falls highway. The cream-colored little farmhouse faced east. A low white picket fence surrounded it like a necklace of old teeth, biting edge up. A little to the south stood a small granary and chicken house. Near by a red barn clung to a sidehill like a rock sticking out of a cliff edge. No smoke came from the single chimney of the house and Pier guessed the old man was out on his rounds.

The horses breasted a leap-off. For a second the bays hesitated, dancing on quick-hitting hoofs. Then, waving their tails and breaking wind, they plunged. Pier let them have their heads. The evener cracked against their rumps. They sprang faster. Pier held onto the side of the seat with one hand, gripped the boy with the other. The bottom of the valley came up. They slowed. The ground became soggy. The wheels calmed. A few seconds later the voyagers slowly barked their way through broomrape and hornwort and pondweed.

The bays could go no farther. White willows and waterweed blocked the way. Pier swung the horses to the north and entered a quiet dell beneath towering trees. Grasses grew thick and wetly green below their hoofs.

Pier stopped and got out. Together with Teo he unhitched the horses and tethered them to a tree. He tied up their fly nets securely and took off their nose baskets. The horses began to feed.

"All right, boy. Pick me up the sacks an' away we'll go."

Teo grabbed eagerly.

Striding along, Pier watched for clumping masses of wild grape. He felt the boy's eyes search him for a hint of what he was up to. He smiled.

They tramped along. Still Pier didn't see a suitable gathering of grapevines. They crossed Blood Run Creek, splashed through a wide shallow fenny. They climbed northward, pushing through water hemp and smartweed. Their nostrils ached from the itch of sneezeweed. Coneflowers clogged their steps.

They entered the tangles of Gitchie Manitou. Pier instantly sensed a change. The land was haunted. According to the Indians, it was here that the Great Spirit had rested after he had made the sun and the moon and the stars and the earth. It was here that the Great Spirit, lonesome for laughter, had scooped up a handful of yellow loess, had fashioned, while idly playing with the soft earth, a figure after his own image, had breathed on it, had created man, the father of all men. It was here too that the Great Spirit, to preserve the fleshes of the Indian fathers during the great flood, had hardened them into red Sioux quartzite.

Ahead, in a clearing, loomed a towering cottonwood. Strung on its mighty frame was a vast matting grapevine. The trunk of the vine was as thick as a young tree. Its knotted and whorled branches reached upward, seeking to smother the great tree. Already it had enveloped the lower limbs, had killed them. Pier stopped to light his pipe. He contemplated the two struggling giant creatures. It was the fight of a whale to free itself from the clutches of an octopus. He stepped off the base of the cottonwood, found it thirty feet in circumference.

"That it?" Teo asked suddenly.

"Yeh."

"We're gonna pick grapes then, ain't we? Wild grapes."

Pier nodded.

"Huh, I knew it all along."

"You did, huh?"

"Sure." Teo craned his neck to look up. "Just look at them grapes

hanging there." Teo jumped for a cluster, came down with it. Blue juice squirted over his fingers. He licked them. "Say! They're sweeter than most."

"Are they?" Pier picked off a swelling grape the size of a bead. It was so full of blue meat and juice it had split. He tasted it. "Say, it's good at that. This must be a good vine. I hope there's enough here."

Teo walked around the tree, sizing it up. "It's just jammed with 'em, Pa. As thick as hangin' dew."

"Good."

The boy scrambled up the vine. Pier was surprised to see how easily the otherwise clumsy boy ascended the snaky, rough branches.

Pier knocked the ashes out of his pipe, carefully thrust it empty into his breast pocket, stuffed an empty brown burlap sack behind his bib front, began to climb too.

Teo looked down from a height. "Be careful a them cottonwood branches, Pa. Specially them dead ones. They snap like chicken legs."

"Uh-huh." Pier grimaced. He was not used to having the boy give him instructions. "Where do you think I was brung up, boy? I've clumb trees before."

"When you was a boy?"

"Right." Pier crawled amongst the heart-shaped leaves. "Might as well start at the top and work down."

"Okay, Pa."

Climbing noisily, brushing past the corrugated bark of the old tree, pushing through huge basket-sized squirrel nests, he came at last to the upper vines. Above him blew the clatter of hard cottonwood leaves. In the hazy afternoon sun, they were a varnished gold.

"Wal, here I am," Pier said, pulling an empty sack out of his overall. "An' where are you?" He looked around in the foliage.

"Here." Teo stuck his head out of a mass of blue-green only a foot away. The boy's eyes were the exact hue of the leaves.

Pier started. "Jumpin' Joe. A man could lose an army in this whoppin' tree." Pier wrestled in the branches to get a sure footing. "Wal, boy, you . . ." He paused, looked around. The boy had vanished, vanished so suddenly he wondered if he had seen a vision. "Hey, where'd you go?"

"Here." Teo's voice was faint. It came from his right, and a little above him.

"Don't you want a sack?"

"Got one."

"Oh." Pier mumbled to himself, looked around, again hunted for a sturdy limb to stand on. At last he found one.

He picked rapidly, gathering clusters of juicy purple-blue in a half-opened palm, with two sure fingers nipping off the stem from the curling twigs. Slowly the sack filled.

The ball of his foot ached. He shifted position.

He ate as he worked. His tongue and lips turned blue, wrinkled up as if he had been eating alum. He enjoyed the tang. He savored the vague smells of river water coming up on a faint west breeze.

His mind brewed. Various feelings and ideas intermingled. Half-formed thoughts simmered.

Nertha was still barren. What should a man do about that? If she never bore again, what kind of future was there left for them? Heartache. Estrangement.

And the corn. Suppose it didn't ripen before the frost came? There were rumors that the wild animals were already putting on heavy furs, that the trees had grown an extra-thick layer of bark this year.

Curious to test the old saw, he snapped off a live cottonwood twig. He peeled it, bit into it. The last layer of bark seemed no thicker than those of other years.

The bark had the taste of herbs, of secret life. Eating it was like eating the meat of the earth itself, digesting it, his body taking in what it needed and excreting what it did not need.

He worked. He ruminated. He slid down the vine a way. He mused. He looked out to the mounding hills on either side. He was riding high. He enjoyed flying over the cupping hills close around. The bluffs were like upended buttocks.

He looked up. Soft cumulus clouds floated overhead. They were like exploded pods of milkweed.

Suddenly into the lazy summertime afternoon there came a high-pitched whining. It rose. The ear-ringing singing was as sharp as a shriek. It was so near by his teeth tittered together.

He looked around. Off to one side, on a twig, with a gray-green leaf as camouflage, rested a long cicada. It shivered with song.

Pier leaned forward to look at it more closely. His fingers slipped. His foot, barely hooked onto a forking branch, slipped too. Suck-

ing sudden breath, frightened, he grabbed for the twig on which the cicada sat. The twig snapped. Cicada and song vanished. Pier fell. He grabbed again, missed, plunged downward. He threw his hands up over his head in a defensive gesture. He shut his eyes. He let himself go. Sharp leaves and twigs and tendrils rasped his arms and shoulders, tore off a suspender button. An arm cracked against the thick bole of the wild grapevine. He bounced off, landed on a swaying hammock of vines and leaves. He waited a moment, opened his eyes. He was safe.

"Hey, Pa. That you fallin'?"

Pier moved his shoulders and arms and legs experimentally. They worked. He grinned. "There wasn't anybody else in the tree, was they?"

Teo said nothing for a moment, then stirred. He rattled down too, sliding down a long ropelike vine, swinging monkeylike above Pier. "You all right, Pa?"

"Sure. Got yer sack full?"

"Sure, but . . ."

"Say, you don't think I fell accidentally, do you?"

Teo eyed him.

"Land alive, boy, I just got tired a pickin' an' thought it about time fer a swim in the river. How about it, you ready?"

Teo fell easily from the branch. "Swimmin'? I'll say."

Pier let himself drop to the ground a few feet below, landing with a ringing thump. "Last one in is a suck-egg dog!" he shouted, beginning to undress.

They raced. Pier purposely held back so that the boy could keep up. They finished undressing at the same time. Then, naked, bare limbs creamy white in the sun, arms and neck banks of deep tanned brown, they legged it over the thick grass. They ran to the rim of the river.

Teo pointed to a noisy, yellow-splashing ford in the Big Sioux. Waters curled over green-mossy, purple boulders. "There. There's the place to wade in."

"How do you know?"

"I was swimmin' there with Jimmy once."

"Ho! An' without my permission?" Pier laughed.

The boy grinned back.

Pier took a deep breath. The smells of the river water, of the dry

August grass, were like heady wine. He took another deep breath, then galloped down to the edge of a small, sandy beach. The flaky skeleton of a minnow lay in his path. Purposely Pier let the boy speed ahead and beat him. They splashed up a whirling spray of warm, amber water. Their clumsy flat feet hit the water like falling pans. They played.

Minutes after, the two came out, dewy, hair running and close-matted to the skull.

Pier saw the boy look at his genitals. Pier smiled. The boy would be wondering when his little dingle would ever get to be as big as a man's.

Pier stooped to pluck a wide blade of grass. He fitted it between two thumbs. With his fingers he built up a hollow chamber. He blew on the tightened green reed. Instantly a piercing whistle lifted, almost out of ear reach, sharper even than the shrilling of the singing, shivering cicada.

· 4 ·

But Teo was not of the farm a son.

A revolt was yeasting in his mind. The excitement of the pigging, the battle with the W-headed monster locusts, the grape hunting had been but momentary joys. All the rest was boredom.

The very next day after graping, to Teo's grief, Pa said at breakfast, "Wal, boy, I got a good job for you today. A fine one."

"Yeh?" Teo didn't look up from his plate of oatmeal and milk and sugar. He knew what the words "good," "fine," meant. Pa used them when there was some mean job afoot.

"Yip. Tell you what you do, Teo." Pa shook a milk-wet spoon at him. "After breakfast, go to the crib an' hunt you up some old sacks, gunny or burlap, or whatever there is that's not much good no more, an' then go to the big fifty east of the woodshed there an' pick cockleburs."

"Oh."

"Now, Teo, don't get that sorrer-down look in yer face. An' don't go mumblin' behind my back either."

Teo sniffed, licked his spoon. He stared at his bowl. Tears filled his eyes. The gray mounds of oatmeal in the blue skim milk wavered.

"Yessir. Jerk out every damned . . . danged cocklebur you see,

roots an' all. An' stuff 'em in them old sacks. When you get done, burn the bastards."

Teo blinked, ground his teeth. He was weak to show tears. He swallowed some oatmeal. He hoped the tears would dry up before Pa saw them. The oatmeal almost gagged him, tried to come up. He choked a little, once more sent it down.

Pa scoffed. "My goodness alive. Such a baby. Lip hanging on the third button. My goodness."

Teo angered, flushed. "Are you gonna help me, Pa?"

Pa stared at him. "Help you? Say, do you think I ain't got nothin' to do?"

"No, but I—"

" 'But' my ass. That cocklebur job is yers. An' yers alone."

Ma looked up with her sad eyes. "But what are you gonna do, Pier?"

Pa jumped to his feet, spilling milk out of his bowl. He glared at her, then at Teo. "Say, who's runnin' this family, I'd like to know?"

Teo looked down.

Pa roared, "By God, I'll show you two. I'll show you who's boss around here."

Again Ma looked up sadly from her plate. "Now, now. Take it easy. As Gramma would say, 'Bidimje, bidimje.' "

" 'Bedim' my ass. It's time that kid learns who's boss around here."

Ma said, a flash of revenge in her pale green eyes, "Well, it's you who made the kid a smarty. You who dug the pit. Now fall in it."

"Are you stickin' up fer him?" Pa's face had become as black as a tornado, his voice a thunderclap.

"No, I ain't 'stickin' up fer him.' I'm only sayin' what's sense, if you must know. It's you who's taught that kid yer man's ways. I told you long ago I didn't want him to wear long pants yit."

"Oh . . . shut up."

Then Ma quieted, cowered.

Pa raved on. "Give a kid a finger, an' by God, he'll take yer whole hand. That's what. Give 'im an inch an' he'll take a yard." Pa came around and stood beside him. "Teo, damn you, you little disrupter, if you don't do a good job in the big fifty today, pullin' out them cockleburs, I'll fry yer behind with a black-snake whip."

"Ya, Pa."

" 'Ya, Pa' what?"

"Ya, Pa. I'll do a good job today."

"All right. Good. An' make sure you do." Pier returned to his chair.

Teo swallowed the last of his oatmeal, omitted slicking up the usual white ridges of sugar on the bottom of the bowl, ran out on the porch.

As he put his shoes on, he heard Ma say, with a great sigh, "Pier, man, you haven't got horse sense any more, let alone a heart."

There was a sudden crash, as if Pa had jumped up and knocked over his chair. Teo jumped for the porch door, not daring to hear more. He ran across the yard with his shoes still untied, his heart jumping like a wild jack rabbit.

He muttered to himself. What had got into Pa all of a sudden to make him fly off the handle so? Pa had bellowed like the Âlde Han Himself. And yesterday he had been such a pal.

Teo stopped to tie his shoes. Grunting, he leaned over his knee. Maybe Pa was this way because of the trouble that lay between Pa and Ma. They sure didn't get along any more. The minute Ma raised her eyes a little, Pa was right on top of her, like a mad tomcat. They were getting to be like Jimmy's pa and ma. Only Ma didn't have Jimmy's ma's back talk.

Teo remembered he had left his floppy straw hat on the milk rack after milking. He ran back stealthily, retrieved it, sped across the yard to the corncrib. Blood bubbled in his veins like shaken wine. He made up his mind to get off the yard as quickly as he could. There was no telling what Pa might do today.

Teo rustled through the empty grain bins, looking for sacks. He searched through the tool shed. The air was heavy with the smell of old jugs, spilled paint, oilcans, mice nests. He went back to the bins, at last found a mound of them. He searched and picked out ten with sizable holes. Some of the sacks had rotted a little. Some were frayed. Just to make sure he wasn't making a mistake, he gathered them up in his arms and shagged them to the house for Pa to look at.

Pa had just come out on the porch. "Wal, an' what do you want?"

"Them sacks. Are these the ones?"

Pa ruffled through them. Pa picked out three. "Them are too good. But the rest you kin have." Pa gripped his shoulder. "Now remember. When you got yer bag full, throw 'em in the ditch by the road

there, so the sun kin dry the weeds. An' be sure to get every last fetch-stickin' one a them, hear? Even the dinky ones, because by fall them are just the ones to throw seeds. Hear?"

"Ya, Pa."

"Hey, don't you know anything else besides 'Ya, Pa'?"

"Okay, Pop."

"Huh."

Teo stepped out of Pa's reach, then bounded away. With the sacks trailing over his shoulder, he chevied down the lane. When he had crossed the culvert, he looked back to see if Pa were still in sight. When he did not see him, he instantly slowed down to a shuffling walk. He muttered to himself.

He thought of running away. It would serve Pa right. Pa had it coming to him for treating him like a slave.

Yes. He would run away. He would go to Sioux Falls. Pa and Ma had cheated him out of a trip last spring, but they wouldn't this time. He would go on his own. He would find himself a job, a man's job of driving a truck, maybe a delivery truck for a store, drive it like that boy did in that *Wallace's Farmer* story. Sure.

He would get along. He would show Pa he was big enough to take care of himself. Pa wasn't the only one who could make things go. In fact, compared to him, Pa was plenty dumb about some things, dumb about the corn picker and motors and phonographs.

Teo neared the end of the lane. He looked over his shoulder again. Pa was sure to be out of sight now.

He glanced at the thousands of rows of towering corn, at the tassels gleaming mistily in the morning sun, at the dew. It was a colossal job, the cocklebur weeding. It would take forever to do the whole fifty acres alone. It would be an endless drudgery, work, slavery, and he only a little boy, a little boy whose friends, Jimmy, Jerry, could play in the grove all the day long. Teo looked up at the sky, swung his eyes from one horizon to the other. On the prairie, when there was work to do, the day was as long as the sky was wide. Slavery.

He glanced at the apple trees in the orchard to the west. A few green apples hung from a trailing bough. He was about to crawl through the fence to get one when he remembered Pa's strict orders that no more apples were to be picked until Ma had canned all she

wanted. Teo glanced nervously over his shoulder, sure that even if Pa wasn't looking at him he was at least reading his mind, knew exactly the naughty thought that was pestering him. Shivering, his mind still raw from the roaring Pa had given him, he turned left and crawled through the gate and entered the big fifty to the east.

Before him rose in majestic gold row upon row of stiff, tall, tasseling corn. Ears stuck up like stallion dingles. Red hair trailed fuzzily from their open ends.

A gentle wind brushed the green leaves aside, opened up a disappearing perspective. At the feet of the giant corn grew multitudes of pigeon grasses and foxtail tufts. And here and there grew a cocklebur, squat, flat-leaved, with ugly prickly fruit.

He threw all but one of the bags beneath the fence. Then, tightening up a loose suspender, and pulling his straw hat down, he started down the row. He stepped along a few feet and then decided he could as well cover four rows as two. He went back to the end and started over.

He went chasing along, his eyes alert for the yellow-flowered, ugly-fruited cocklebur. For a little way his mind was awake to the job. His eyes saw everything: occasional green mosses on the north side of the cornstalks, single ropes of spider webbing, a darting rabbit, a slinking fox, an ear black with smut, two small cocklebur plants.

He worked on. He stumbled down endless halls, down endless rows of slim green pillars. The broad corn-leaf shadows moved over his hat and arms. Corn silk and spider threads trailed against his face. His skin itched.

But after a while, dragging along, his attention sagged, his mind wandered. The new sore festered. He played with sweet and revengeful thoughts. Unconsciously he doubled his fists, shook them. He talked aloud. Mumbled.

Gaddang it anyway. What was the use a livin'? Life was nothing but a lot of work. Work and more work. It was full of tiresome jobs. Every day, every morning and evening, day after day, year after year, a man had to milk them gaddang cows, get them gaddang eggs, get them gaddang cobs and wood for the stove, feed them gaddang pigs. There was so much drudging work a man was an old man before he grew up. Work, work, work. Pull weeds, drive horses, pull cows, get cobs. Dinky jobs. Nothing real or big. No pickers, no

tractors, no radios, no nothing. A lot of work. And for what? Tears and a black coffin. A black coffin-prison like Grandpa Romke got.

A tune went through his mind:

Oh, I wish I had the wings of an angel.
Over these prison walls I would fly.

Now why didn't Pa just get a corn picker once? What fun that would be. And how easy farm work would suddenly become. A man would drive Ol' Long Jaw down them rows like a shot out a hell. Go whipping along, snapping ears, filling wagons plumb full to the brim, fill the cribs in just two days. And if a fellow would stick a Ford motor in Ol' Long Jaw, he could pick the whole works in a day. And then a fellow could go around picking the neighbors' corn, make a lot a easy money and sit on Easy Street. Go to picnics and go to Lake Okoboji, go to Spirit Lake and all them places, go up and down roller coasters and around and around in the merry-go-rounds boy oh boy what fun that would be yessir.

"Wonder what made Ma and Pa so afraid of machines? Can't figure it. Machines are man's best friend. They make the work real easy. Give you more time to have fun. They're better than hired hands, and they won't bullox things up either like the Âlde Han is always doing. Ol' Long Jaw the Picker, Yellow Jack the Cultivator, Big Nose the Elevator, Big Head the Windmill, and Quick Foot the Buick, all them machines is real good friends of man. Funny Pa don't take to them. Can't figure it atall.

"Pa just don't understand that them machines has got hearts. Real hearts. Pa don't understand that. But maybe, that's because he's dumb about such things. Yep, machines has not only got names like cows and horses, they even die like them. Pa even said so himself, the dumb bastard. He said it the day Big Buster the five-horse engine quit on him. Pa was cranking and swearing, and at last Big Buster popped off a couple a big busters, a couple more, and then stopped again. Pa roared, 'Judas t'Priest, the damned thing died again.'"

A cornstalk, lying athwart Teo's path, slapped his face. He awoke from his reverie with a start. Guiltily he looked back. He couldn't remember having watched the four rows the last way. He retraced his steps, running anxiously along, wondering where his eyes had left off looking, wondering if he were doing the rows twice. He

grumbled to himself. Finally he gave up and decided he had gone far enough back. He hurried to pick up the trail again. He found the fallen cornstalk, went on.

He mumbled angrily to himself. One man couldn't do this job alone. It was too much. Just think. A whole field of fifty acres. He kicked at the loose clods under his shoes. He snapped off an ear and threw it to the ground.

Suddenly the lofty roof of waving green leaves opened. The rows of tall green pillars ended. Before him lay an open patch. He was near the end of the field.

As wary as a savage, he stepped into the open glade. He lifted his feet high in the weeds.

He stumbled over something, landed flat on his face. Frightened, he jumped up, was about to scamper away when his eye caught the glossy, wriggling design of a blue watermelon. His eyes opened. So this was the place where Pa had said he had done some special planting this year!

Quickly Teo looked around to see if Pa could sight him from the yard. He laid the sack to one side, sat down on his nubbin hams. He rolled the melon over and brushed off the pale yellow spot on which the melon had lain the summer long. He tapped it expertly. Gaddang it! he thought wildly, the gaddang thing was ripe. His eyes narrowed. Should he take it home to Pa? He considered the idea. Suppose he did? Would the slavery end? Would the bawlings out stop?

Teo grinned wisely. He laughed. Take it home and get bawled out for picking it too early? Huh. That's what you think. That's what you think.

Teo rolled the melon over, cracking and pinching it, feeling its coolness. His tongue slavered. Spittle drooled on his pink young lips. He rubbed his stomach. He drew back to size up the melon.

If a guy would just eat the ripest parts, he could just about clean it up, couldn't he? Let's see, it must be about ten inches long, five inches through. Heck. Sure. A guy could get his stomach around that. Sure.

Aha. But what if Pa should happen to catch him? What if Pa found the seeds and the rinds? The Alde Han was sure to lead Pa straight to them someday.

Teo sat trembling.

Still, a little taste would hurt none. A little tester square out of it wouldn't hurt none.

He burrowed around in his pocket, found his new jackknife, a knife Pa had given him the past summer, opened the thin blade, carefully cut a blue square out of the melon rind. He pried it up. To his glee its tip was pink-red. It was ripe. Real ripe. He savored it, ran his tongue around his lips a few times. Good. Real good.

Heck. What a dumbhead he was. Heck, a guy could bury the rinds and seeds. Bury 'em so deep that the Âlde Han would think it too much trouble to dig 'em up to show 'em to Pa.

Suddenly taking a deep, daring breath, his eyes bright and roving, his heart beating madly, he jammed his knife into it, sliced it open. It fell in halves. The pink fleshes flashed juicily in the sun. Well, now it was too late.

Teo cut through the halves, began to munch on one of the quarters. Spitting seeds, hurrying, swallowing, the juice trickling down his chin, he bore through the sweet meat of the melon.

The smell of crushed pigeon grass underneath his leather soles was dizzying. The sun revolved in the heavens.

His stomach began to fill. He belched. Air frothed from his nubbin behind. He jumped nervously, grinned to himself. He waved a hand at the fleeting intestinal bubble. He gorged. He burped. He watered the corn twice. He gulped through the entire melon.

He heard a sound behind him. He jumped up, heart beating. Someone was in the cornfield, spying on him. He could hear the guy breathe. Pa?

Picking up his sack, Teo scurried across the open patch, and once more entered the halls of dark green corn.

There came to him the memory of a nightmare. One night he had awakened sweating and crying from a terrible dream. He and Pa were fighting. Pa was hitting him so hard that his face, cracking beneath the blows, sounded like the breaking up of ice on the Big Sioux. And he was trying to hit back; only his blows wouldn't land. His arms felt as blown up as balloons, as heavy as logs. He could hardly move them. They were paralyzed, frozen. And the few blows he did throw out, Pa ducked easily, laughing at him. Teo shook. That dream had been a terrible one. Thinking of it again made him break out in a heavy sweat. He rushed to the end of the field.

And there, beneath the fence, he found his first ree' patch of

cockleburs. The skulking, coarse brown seeds were hidden beneath yellow-green leaves. Teo greeted them with a roar. The sons a bitches. He jumped at the first one at hand, tore it up roots and all. He jammed it into the opening of his sack. The cocklebur resisted him. Like a rooster, it fought to stay out of the sack. Teo swore. He shoved it in, breaking off a few branches. He tore at the next one. He tore up the whole patch, devastating the area.

He started back. He stumped through the leafy corridors, watching for the offenders with hawk-sharp eyes. The cockleburs were pest birds and he was going to kill them all. He was going to get them all by the neck and wring 'em out of their holes in the ground and put 'em in a sack and bring 'em to the road and start a bonfire with 'em. Yessir.

He stopped to water himself again; then rushed along. He found two cockleburs on the rise, another in the thin dip east of the culvert, and then, to his surprise, popped out at the other end of the field. Just ahead was the road fence.

In an instant he imagined he was driving a team of horses. He rammed against the fence, shouted, "Whoa, there! Queen! Daise! You gaddanged dumb bastards, runnin' inta the fence, whoa there! Whoa! That's it. Easy does it. Easy does it. Daise! Get around there now. There. Good. Easy does it. Don't tramp down all that corn!"

The horses turned around, he forgot about them.

He looked into the sack, decided it could hold one more round of cockleburs.

He was driving a tractor. He put his lips together, roared, "Birrript! Birrript!" He whipped the steering wheel around. He lined up the tractor, started down the row. "Birrript!"

Entering the leafy hall again, thinking of the long way ahead, he forgot about the tractor. Ahead was work, work, work. And more work. His child shoulders sagged. He stopped.

He looked down the hill toward the orchard. He longed for an apple. He glanced at the yard and saw that Pa must have gone plowing. The gang plow that had been standing in front of the tool shed was gone. Suddenly feeling greatly relieved, suddenly wanting to do something that had always been forbidden him, deliciously happy with the freedom to do anything, anything, he ran toward the orchard. Those apples sure looked good.

Nearing the fence, he laid his hat near a pole, ducked down, crept

like a weasel on his hands and knees through the prickly pigeon grass, crawled underneath the gate, scurried across the lane, and, leaping, gained the first branch of a crab-apple tree. He scampered up the leafy brown-red boughs.

The first apples he saw were too green. He sampled a nubbin. Bitterness welled on his tongue. He spat. Bah.

He climbed higher. Near the tip of the tree, at the end of a long spiring branch, hung a few crab apples with a flash of red. He crawled up. He snapped off a pink-striped apple. He tasted it and found it good. He munched slowly. It was very good. He cleaned it down to the core, tossed the rest away.

He crawled up the limb a little farther. A twig caught an overall suspender. He backed down to unhook himself.

At last he reached the top. Quickly he filled his two front and two rear pockets, dropped one into his shirt pocket, filled the bib of his overall. He counted twenty-three crab apples in all and decided that that would be enough for the morning.

When he started down another twig hooked him. He sawed his leg against it, feeling the sharp tip of the twig dig deep into his flesh. He jerked. His fingers slipped on the branch. His body swung, slipped around the limb. He dropped. He closed his eyes, pinching his brain together, waiting for the hit of earth. But, instead, he bounced on a branch below, slid off it, thumped onto the wind-woven tresses of grass. He sprang up unhurt, ran for the field, his eyes wild, his feet beating a pattering drum on the grass and on the sun-baked earth in the lane. He bolted over the gate. He jumped onto the powdery dust of the field. Then, secure in the immensity of the green cornfield, and picking up his straw hat and clapping it cockily over one ear, he sat down amidst the weeds to munch the stolen apples.

The capacity of his stomach amazed him. Even after eating a whole watermelon, he still was hungry.

Some of the apples were sour. He nibbled them a little, threw the rest away. The good ones he ate down to the transparent flesh around the seeds and the brown curved stem.

He was working his way through the last of the apples when he heard wheels rattling on the road to the east. He raised his straw-hatted head out of the weeds. He peered up the rise. His mouth dropped open in surprise. Toward him came a rolling caravan of

covered wagons, just like the ones he had seen in his *American History*. Four brown, glossy horses drew the vehicles along. Beside and behind ran horses with long lead ropes. Swarthy, Indianlike faces with sharp eyes and dark hair stared out of the round front opening. Gypsies! Segueners! Hexes! A whole tribe of Kaias and Stephans!

Teo ducked down. He had heard about these thieves. They kidnapped little boys.

Teo sprawled out on his belly. He took off his hat and raised his head cautiously out of the weeds again.

They were directly before him now. He crouched, shivering, hoping they would not spot him. He knew he should keep hidden but the mysterious, brown-eyed world spinning past before him was too much to miss.

He stared at the rear openings in the wagons. Out of the doorway of the third wagon gleamed the bared buttocks of a little girl. She was holding onto the edges of the canvas. Her head turned to one side, she was peering to see if she was spilling outside the wagon. Silver trickles splashed down through the dust. Her behind looked like a two-petaled pink daisy.

Then a cloud of rising dust obliterated the fleeting picture. The last of the wagons rolled by. The columning dust hid the entire caravan. They were gone.

Teo stood up out of the weeds. He watched them roll down the hill, roll past the lane and the orchard, down into the valley of the Big Sioux. A rising boss in the land soon hid them.

He sat down again, wondering about the strange creatures.

A lazy numbness possessed his limbs. He lay down.

He pinched himself, joyful in the thought that he had been lucky to escape them. He imagined himself caught. He drew a fantastic picture of himself living a painful life in their employ.

The drowsiness grew in him. He thought about taking a nap. He rolled on his back in the weeds, rustling around until he had made himself a comfortable nest in the powdery soil and the sparse foxtail. He drew his straw hat down over his eyes, thrust his hands deep in his pockets to protect himself against the flies.

He thought of the pretty gypsy girl relieving herself out of the back of the covered wagon. A clear picture of her plump, rosy daisy came to him. Accidentally, through the cloth of his trouser

pocket, his fingers touched himself. His fingers roved. He took his hand out of his pocket, played some more. Life was wonderful. Wonderful. He thought of the gypsy girl. The world became a mellow, golden place. The smell of the weeds was sweet. A golden glow spread in his thighs. Everybody was fine. Everybody. Ma and Pa, and Jimmy, and the pretty little gypsy peeing out of the wagon.

A whirlwind began to turn furiously in his thighs. Suddenly the pleasure became painful. It burst like a boil. Yelping, clutching his straw hat, he sprang up. His ears rang. Guilt-stricken, he started hurriedly down the row. With deep gravity he went back to work, examining every row carefully. He hurried along.

After a while, his rabbit mind quieted. He took up pieces of the experience and examined them. He felt nauseated. His mind was guilty-clear. It rang and echoed with his guilt. He couldn't understand that it had happened to him. That a guy should ever want to play with it was beyond his understanding. How had he ever come to do it?

His stomach bobbed in his belly. He felt an impulse to vomit. But the apples and the melon wouldn't come. Then, almost before he could drop his trousers, his bowels rattled and blew. He was just across from the cob shed and he ran through the corn rows, hopped through the fence, grabbed up a handful of red cobs, darted back into the field, squatted.

He sat groaning miserably. His belly contorted. Convulsed. It was awful to have the misery trots. A damnation. A sin. He had done a terrible thing.

3. FALL DAYS

. I .

THE EVENING BELLS WERE CHIMING:

Ring! go home, fathers, brothers, go home again,
Ring! go home again.

Pier drove the panting horses over the rise. The falling sun struck him full in the face. It bronzed his cheeks.

The hill began to tilt down. The machine picked up momentum. The grays, Maid and Mell, trotted easily.

Pier sat proudly on the seat. He felt powerful. The ponderous corn picker was a monstrous boulder stirring beneath him. He was Lord and Master of it.

The massive, livid bronze-red sun hit the rim of the earth, bounced, sank, bounced, sank out of sight.

He neared the lane. He heard Teo's sudden yell. He saw the boy run across the yard, saw him set down the egg pail by the woodshed, saw him come bounding toward him in a long, leaping stride.

The boy rushed up, breathless. "Pa, you did it! Bought it!"

Inwardly glowing but still trying to keep his dignity, Pier said gruffly, "Wal, it's a cinch I didn't steal it."

"You bought it. A real genuwine picker." Teo ran tiptoeing behind the machine, stroking the galvanized sheet metal hooding the rear wheel, petting the slim gathering shoes up front. The boy's feet kicked up little puffs of dust on the highway. The huge machine creaked and bouldered along.

Teo said, "Our ship must a come in then, huh, Pa?"

"Wal . . . I suppose you could say that."

Teo prattled on. "Boy, will we show our neighbors. Just watch our smoke. Say, Pa, are you gonna drive it with horses or engine?"

"Horses a course."

"Uh-huh."

Pier shook a finger at the boy. "Now lookee here, boy. Don't you go gettin' any funny idees now. Hear?"

"No, Pa. But an engine sure would make this thing tick."

"Boy, you sure set a lot a store by motors, don't y'u?"

"They're the only thing."

Pier laughed. He turned the grays into the lane. He chuckled to himself. He shifted on the hard steel spring seat. The heavy machine rode gently. It crushed small clods and bumps beneath its heavy traction wheels.

"Kin you put it in gear once, Pa?"

"Naw, we'll wait till it's time to pick."

"Turn it on once, Pa. Just to see how it works."

"Wal, all right." Pier pulled up the horses. "Whoa, boys, whoa." The grays stiffened their hind legs. The machine slowly fell to a stop.

There was a click beneath Pier. He whirled around. "Hey!"

"Okay. Go."

"'Go' what?"

"Go ahead. I threw it in gear already."

"Dagnab it, did you know how to . . . ?" Pier shook his head. "Boy, boy. You know too much for your age."

Teo's green-blue eyes looked up at him in mild astonishment. "Know too much? To run this? It don't take no brains to run these babies."

"Babies?"

Teo rustled underneath the machine, searching, peering. "It ain't a new one, is it? It's that secondhand one that Blacktail got in last week."

Pier sighed. "Wal, I'll be cow-kicked by a mule. Sometimes I wonder who's the pa in our family."

"Say, Pa, kin I go run an' telephone Jimmy an' tell him all about it?"

"Telephone . . . ? Oh, that's right. I'd already forgot we got the dagnabbed thing." A week before, Pier had at last joined the Starum Telephone Co-operative. "Boy, ye're sure anxious to use all them fetch-stickin' gadgets, ain't you? Boy, boy. Wal . . . no, you better not tell him yit. No use t'get the neighbors jealous. They'll be over soon enough." Pier recalled the Old Dreamer's remarks about emulation. "Soon enough."

"Well, that won't hurt none, will it? The sooner Jimmy's pa knows it the better. So he kin get ready to let us pick his corn for him."

"Wal . . ." Pier held his tongue. The boy had hit exactly on the idea that had tipped his mind in favor of buying the machine. Make the machine pay for itself. "Wal, we'll see."

"Anyways, let's see if it works. Get goin' once, Pa."

Pier shook his head. The boy was too fast for him. Slowly tightening his hands on the lines again, he called to the horses. "All right there. Mell. Maid. Git. Gluckt."

The horses leaned into their traces. Their rumps bulged powerfully. Slowly the machine moved, mumbled, roared. Sprocket wheels sang. Chains brattled.

Pier drove a few feet. Then, afraid something might go wrong, afraid to push a good thing along too fast, he stopped.

He turned in his seat, stretched down a long arm, turned the machine out of gear. "Wal, son, how'd she go?"

"Oh . . . all right."

"Wal," Pier humphed, "wal, I'm glad to hear you say so."

"But it needs a little tunin' up."

Pier stared. He shook his head. The boy was really getting out of hand. He narrowed his red brows. In the ruddy dusk, his eyes glowed. "Say, by the way, you got the chores done yit?"

"All but the milkin'," Teo said, his voice suddenly muffled.

Pier leaned over. "Hey, where'd you go?"

"Here," Teo said, suddenly popping out through an opening on the other side of the machine.

Pier whirled, sat aghast. "You crawl through it?"

"Sure. Ol' Long Jaw won't bite you."

"Ol' Long Jaw?"

"Sure. That's the picker's name."

"Wal, that does it." Pier raised his arms to the heavens. "Âlde Han, here I come. I'm givin' up the ghost."

. 2 .

The open-pit silo was almost filled. The vast trench, seventy feet long and fifteen feet wide, dug out of the earth between the barn and the cattle shed just west of it with a team of horses and a scraper, bristled with shattered bits of stalks and ears. The fermenting smell of green corn fodder was sweet and pleasant.

The tramping in the pit tired Pier. He stopped at one end, sat down on the rim of the hard earth-wall. He wiped his face. The cool air of September was refreshing.

He glanced at the ensilage cutter leaning over the middle of the pit. Its crane-neck blower, rising into the sky, wiggled each time a wad of fodder blew through it. It roared. In the pit, mounds, held upright by the blasting pressure of the air, piled up steeply, sometimes almost clogged the spout nose.

Otto Grimovich, who had just come in from the field with a big load of clumsy corn bundles, was throwing off onto the feeding platform. Ol' Spit Triggs, who owned the cutter, was jamming the straggly stalks into the chawing machine.

The bundles fell rhythmically. They moved up. The flying steel teeth caught them. They vanished. *Garumff*. In a moment they shot up the twenty-foot-high crane neck, flupped down into the pit.

A pile mounded again. Pier tugged at the rope tied to the nose of the blower. Slowly another steeping mound built up. Corn kernels,

dust, frayed stalks, crushed leaves, cut tassels spattered and bounced to all sides.

Feeling rested again, his breath caught, Pier stood up. He threw a quick look over the yard. There was the pop-up tractor shaking on its wheels, there the neighbors working down the corn rows in the west fifth of the big fifty, there a full bundle wagon coming in to follow Otto. He nodded. All was going well. He stepped through the sludgy silage. The soft green stuff was heavy going afoot.

He wondered where the kid Teo had gone. Probably in the corncrib alley, crawling around in the corn picker, greasing it, memorizing its parts and works. Pier smiled and shook his head. Such interest was a good thing as long as it helped with the farming, but too much of it wasn't good either. Right now the boy should be here, driving old Mell through the silage to help him tramp it down.

Pier reached the end of the pit, turned, started back, driving his booted feet deep into the green-gold milky mush, stamping, driving, tramping. He reached down for a handful. Smelled it. It was the first time he had made ensilage for the cows, and already he was sure it would make the best feed he had ever had.

He smiled to himself. Ae, life was good. Life was rich. Signs all pointed to a bumper year. The great oats crop of the summer was already safely in the bin. Three hayings lay sweet in the barn, both alfalfa and slough. Straw he had more than enough of. And the manure in the two rotting, fermenting straw butts was enough to fertilize a county. Last, but not least, there was the husking corn. Another week and it would be safely out of reach of any pinching frost.

He whistled. He sang a little. All day long two lines of song had been whirling through his head, whirling until he thought he would go crazy:

Hi O, well O,
How are you tod'y O.

The words had popped into his mind in the morning, after he had greeted a half-dozen neighbors. The repetition had stirred up echoes in his head.

He stamped along. Tramped. He recalled Ol' Spit Triggs's surprise when he had seen the picker. Pier chuckled. Ol' Thistle Chin had

once boasted he would be the first to get one. Ae, but he had not taken into account the most up-to-date farmer in the county.

Pier looked around the yard. Just where was that boy, anyway? He had better hurry and help his old man or he would find him buried beneath the corn silage.

Then he saw Nertha come out of the house with the three-thirty lunch. Seeing that Otto wasn't quite finished with the load, Pier tied the blower to a pole near a low spot in the pit and went across to help.

The cutter howled mournfully beside him. It quivered in the grip of the spinning pulley and cutter knives. He saw Otto's lips move in speech. Pier smiled, and shook his head to let Otto know he couldn't hear him in the din.

The straggling cornstalks were hard to handle. Pier had the feeling he was shoving awkward, unwilling calves into the narrow mouth of a meat grinder.

A falling bundle from Otto's hand cracked his pate. It knocked off his straw hat. Pier growled, looked up, smiled, cursed, jammed the offending bundle into the maw.

The stiff stalks oozed green juice. At the base of the bundle and just beneath the binding twine bulged bunches of cut pigeon-grass tops. The seeds of the weeds spilled out on the feeding table. Gradually the wind belching out of the cutter mouth blew them away. Some spilled into Pier's pockets and rolled-up pant-leg cuffs.

The load was off. Ol' Spit Triggs shut down the pop-up. The whirring cutter slowly quieted. Ears ached with the sudden unwonted silence around. Normal speech sounded like yells.

Nertha set the lunch by the tractor; and left. Her long gray dress trailed a little behind her. The nubbin of hair at the base of her skull bobbed with each listless step.

Pier strode heavy-limbed, cumberingly to the baskets. "Wal, set down, boys, an' to her." He waved at the pot of tea and pan of bread and cake.

The men sat down heavily, joints creaking, pleasant groans escaping them. They tipped back their hats. They wiggled around until their hams found just the right spot on their heels.

Pier rolled back the cloth cover. He gestured again. He sat heavily on his heels, smiling to himself. While the men selected their sandwiches and filled their cups, he wrote on the dusty ground with a

calloused finger. The fingernail filled with dirt and, snapping it, he rid himself of the tight feeling.

After Otto and Ol' Spit Triggs had taken their first helpings, Pier modestly selected his. He munched slowly.

Presently he asked, "Wal, Spit, you ol' grizzle gut, do you think this corn'll make good silage?"

Ol' Spit Triggs chewed on a lump of bread and cheese, swallowed. He quaffed some tea, rinsed his mouth. "Oh . . . pretty good." Ol' Spit Triggs's eyes roved over the yard, came to rest on the crib alley where the picker stood.

Pier withheld a smile.

Ol' Spit Triggs rubbed his sides, scratched. "By golly, if I didn't have lice, I'd think I had 'em."

Pier nudged Otto. "Wal, slowbull, what do you think?"

"It'll make a good brew. Good."

Ol' Spit Triggs grunted. He chewed on a last bit of cake. Envy wrinkled his eyes.

Pier rinsed his mouth with some warm, amber tea. "Aw, c'mon, Spit, don't hold it against me. It wasn't me who really got that picker. It was the kid."

"Teo?"

"Sure. He talked me into it. Course, I was some willin' myself. But if the kid didn't know so much about machines, I'd never a got it. I'm not really a machine man."

Ol' Spit Triggs snuffled, bit off a chew of tobacco, sniffed, rolled his shoulders.

"I just couldn't let them machine fingers of his go to waste," Pier continued.

"Uh-huh."

Pier finished his cake, finished a last swallow of tea. "Judas Priest, Spit, if I'm such a pain to you, pull up an' git."

"Aw, it ain't you so much."

"Wal, who then?"

"Oh . . . I always tell my wife to lay off gossipin', so I shouldn't say it . . . but . . . it's that bastard Goldfish Gil."

"You mean Gil the cream hauler?"

"Yeh."

Pier raised his brows. He had always liked the garrulous trucker.

Twice a week Gil came to pick up cream for the Farmers' Co-operative Creamery at Rock Falls. "What'd he do now?"

"Oh . . . nothin'." Ol' Spit Triggs spilled a long sluice of tobacco juice to one side. "Nothin'."

"He crawl in bed with yer wife?"

"Huh. How'd you guess it?"

Pier lighted his pipe. His eyes narrowed. He pinched his mind to keep from saying that Gert hadn't been nicknamed Slop-hole Gertie for nothing. "Not really?"

"Yeh. And she ain't the only one he's been monkeyin' around with."

"No?"

Ol' Spit Triggs rubbed his gray beard. Brown trickles ran down his chin. "Again it's gossipin', but . . . well. Red Joe's Edna."

"Edna?"

"Sure."

Pier whooped. "Edna? Her? That dried-up peanut?"

"The same. Ain't you heard how Gil got the name a Goldfish Gil?"

"No."

Otto coughed uneasily. He filled his hand with sunflower seeds, began chewing.

Ol' Spit Triggs, clearing his throat, scratching, said, "Well, the way I heard it, it went like this. Goldfish Gil was gettin' his cream from Red Joe, just like he gets it twice a week from you guys. Well, one day, Red Joe noticed that every time he was in the back of the field it took Goldfish Gil a hell of a long time to load up the cream. So Red Joe got suspicious. He figgers awhile, an' sets a trap. He tells Edna he's gonna fix fence in the back forty. He makes a show a going there an' then doubles back, hides in the corncrib. Pretty soon Goldfish Gil comes on the yard. Red Joe watches. Here comes Edna, carryin' the cream pails, all smiles. They talk. Red Joe can't hear 'em, but he can see 'em. They talk confidential. They look around the yard, look to the back forty. Goldfish Gil fills the test bottle with cream, empties the rest in the big cans. Then they go into the house. Red Joe waits a little, waits until he thinks they've got in bed, then he sneaks up, busts into the house hell-a-kitin', bursts upstairs to the bedroom, breaks open the door. An' there stands Gold-

fish Gil, buttoning up his pants, his face red, his hands all thumbs. Red Joe says, 'What the hell's goin' on here?' Edna says, white, tryin' to get her breath, 'Why, nothin', Joe.' An' Goldfish Gil, he says, 'Why, nothin', Joe. She was only showin' me her goldfish. There in the bowl there.' "

"Naw," Pier laughed. "Not really?"

"It's the God's truth, man."

"Wal I'll be a monkey's uncle. Ol' Red Joe. Wait until he comes in from the field with his load."

Ol' Spit Triggs gleamed. For the moment his gruffness was gone.

Otto spat forth the empty hull of a seed. "Sss-pitch. Yip. I always say, wimmen's no good. Cows. Thank God I didn't get married."

Ol' Spit Triggs nodded. "Man, you said right."

"An' yer mother, Otto?" Pier shot at him.

Otto stilled.

Just then a cow wandered around the corner of the barn. "Hey!" Pier exclaimed. "Ol' Princess must a knocked down the gate. Up, boys." They sprang up, chased her lurching into the yard again, came back.

Pier said, sliding up against the back wheel of the pop-up tractor, "Now there's a wonderful cow. Twice she's thrown me twins. An' her daughter, Susabelle, she's thrown me twins once. A wonderful cow. Always fat an' nice, an' still gives four buckets a milk a day."

Ol' Spit Triggs quirked up grizzled brows. "Had yer cattle tested yit?"

"What fer?"

"T.b."

"T.b.?" Vaguely Pier remembered Pederson's remark about it.

"Sure. Ain't you heard? Guv'ment vets're testin' cattle everywhere. All over Ameriky. Don't you read yer paper?"

"Aw, who the hell cares to read a paper? They're mostly full a lies anyway." Pier picked up a straw from the ground, cleaned his teeth with it.

"Well, just the same, the guv'ment's testin' 'em. Ain't they, Otto?"

"Y'u bet. Sss-pitch."

"T.b. Ain't that consumption?"

"That's it. An' the cows, they pass it on to people. Kids."

"Oh horsecollar. That's just some more a that wild city-bird talk. Monkeyshines. A crooked game some politician's playin'."

Ol' Spit Triggs smiled meanly. "Just the same, the guv'ment vets are testin' right an' left. Condemning them."

"Huh. Yeh. An' I suppose the Sioux Falls commissioners're buyin' 'em up?"

"I can't say." Greed opened Ol' Spit Triggs's eyes a little. "I do know, though, they ain't payin' much more than what I pay fer run-down cattle."

"Ho!" Pier exclaimed. "I catch now. Ye're in cahoots with them. They condemn 'em, yer renderin' works makes soap out a 'em. Wal, grizzle-guts, when you guys come around to test my cows, don't expect nothin' less than a pants full a lead fer yer trouble."

"Shootin' guv'ment men ain't exactly a wise thing to do."

"Look. What I do on my farm is my own damned business. Nobody kin tell me what I kin do."

"You'll talk a different tune when they come on yer yard."

"The hell I will." Pier pointed to a few cows coming up the lane from the pasture. "Look, do them cows look like they got t.b.? Why, any man kin see they're as fat as mud. Healthy. Full a git an' go."

Ol' Spit Triggs grunted. "Many a fat cow's got t.b."

"Horse collar, mister."

"That's what they tell me."

"Flapdoodle."

"Well, I'm only tellin' what I heard."

Otto looked up from his bulking silence. "Ah. Here comes the next load."

Pier stood up, pointed his pipe at Ol' Spit Triggs. "Anyway, you just tell them testin' friends a yers to be careful not to come on my yard."

Otto coughed, looked around the yard, asked. "Say, Pier, what's that boy a yers doin'? Ain't he supposed to keep trampin'?"

Pier swallowed, tightened his attention to the work at hand. "Oh. Oh, that's right." Pier put away his pipe. "That's right. I'll be back in a minute." He strode toward the corncrib.

Near the tool shed stood old Mell, bridle hanging, drive lines dragging. As Pier came up, she looked up from her cropping. Pier slapped her rump affectionately.

"Teo. Oh, Teo."

No answer.

"Teo. Lunch's ready."

"Here." Teo peered around the corner of the crib. He was a mess of grease from head to foot.

"Huh. I knew food would bring you out. What are you up to in there?"

"Nothin'." Teo held something behind him.

Pier drew the hand around. "My best crescent wrench, huh. What the hell you doin', boy?"

"Nothin'."

Sniffing, looking, Pier stepped past the picker. Before him lay the nude motor of a car. "Where in the blazes did you get that?"

"From Blacktail's junk yard." Teo watched Pier's face closely. "I bought it. It's an old Ford motor an' it'll make the picker run of itself."

"Bought it? With what?"

"A check."

"Whose check?"

"Yours. I made one out. Signed yer name."

Pier paled. "You forged one then?"

The boy blinked. "I din't do anything wrong, did I, Pa?"

"How much?"

"Oh, just a couple a bucks."

Pier came to. "Boy, boy. You can't write checks an' sign other people's names."

"But I had to have the money. You see, if I put this motor on here, right here behind Ol' Long Jaw's back tooth here, why, we'll be the first in the country to have an automatic picker."

"Boy, boy. Where do you get them idees?"

"I dunno. They just come. Like breathin', I guess."

Pier shook his head. "An' how did you get that motor home here without tellin' me?"

Teo looked down at his feet. His greasy cap slid forward on his head. "Well, I . . ."

"Speak up, boy."

"Why, I took the bays an' got it. Yestiddy. When you was over to Red Joe's."

"The bays?"

"Yeh. I drove 'em."

"My God in heaven. Now I don't know the last of it. Boy, boy,

do you want to drive me to an early grave?" Pier tolled his head.

"No, but . . ."

"Teo. Listen. I don't want no motor in my picker. Hear?"

"Ya, Pa."

"An' by the way, ain't you supposed to be trampin' silage with Mell?"

"Sure, but——"

"Boy, why don't you get before I fly off the handle again?"

Teo jumped. He ran to the horse, grabbed her mane, hopped up, swung his leg over her back, was off, riding bareback like a hump-nosed Sioux.

· 3 ·

Sunset enveloped the earth. The entire horizon was alight with fires.

Pier sat on the front steps, facing the east. Below him, on the bottom step, sat Teo, reading a book.

Pier toyed with a shiny harmonica. He had come out on the front steps to play to himself awhile.

He fumbled with the mouth organ. He heard Nertha washing the dishes in the kitchen. He heard her sigh, pause, heard her draw in a shuddering breath, explode a loud sneeze. Without looking, he knew her face was wrinkling up with pleasure.

He stirred on the top step. All day a resentment had been stirring in the back of his head. Now it came to the fore. The kid had ignored an express command never to drive the fiery bays, Daise and Queen. Pier cursed inwardly. The boy might have had a runaway, might have been terribly mangled. Ae, the boy was getting ready to push him out of the armchair, the father chair, just like he had once ejected Âlde Romke from it.

Teo, sitting on his legs, reading intently, leaned forward a little in the purple dusk.

"Boy, ain't you got that book read out yit?"

No answer.

Pier said, "Boy, how can you get all that learnin' in yer head without it bustin'?" An idea was like an oat to Pier. Too many made a granary run over.

Teo flicked a shoulder muscle, as if to shoo the remark away.

"I said to quit readin'. You'll ruin yer eyes."

"Aw, Pa, I kin see in the dark."

"As good as a cat, I suppose."

"Better."

Pier raised his red brows. The kid was really getting out of hand. He asked, "Teo. When you took them bays, did you ask yer ma fer permission?"

Teo's blue-green eyes opened. "Her? Was I supposed to ask her?"

"Wal, wasn't you supposed to get permission from somebody?"

Teo looked down.

"You respect yer elders, don't you?"

"Sure. But . . ."

" 'But' what?"

"Well, it'd look kind a funny fer me to ask permission from somebody who knows less about 'em than I do."

"Ho!"

"Besides, all I had to do was to give them horses some sugar an' then they was my friends."

Pier sat chewing his teeth.

"Sure. I read it in a book. Give a horse a lump a sugar an' he'll be yer friend forever."

"But the main thing is, you still didn't ask one a yer parents fer permission, did y'u?"

"Well, no. But you wasn't here. An' I was in a hurry."

"Look, Teo. I want you to get this straight. When you use them horses, ye're to ask for permission. Get it?"

"But if I hadn' a hurried, some other guy would a beat me to the motor."

Pier stood up. "Look. I just asked you a question. Yes or no."

Teo got to his feet too, backed away a step.

"Boy, I deman' respect. Answer me." Pier came down, readied his foot.

Teo cast a hurt, accusing glance at Pier.

"I deman' respect."

"Sure, Pa."

"You'll mind after this?"

"Sure, Pa."

"And—"

"Sure, Pa."

"Good."

Pier settled on the steps again. He fingered his mouth organ. He glanced across the darkening yard.

Teo settled down, began reading.

Quiet spread around them. The glows on the horizon faded.

Night came up black, came up fast from the east. Shadows in the grove engulfed the trees. Knotted whorls of night raced over the yard. Fireflies pricked the brown-purple dusk with miniature strokes of lightning. In a few moments, it became night-dark.

Teo went inside to read by lamplight.

Pier stretched, stirred, got up. The September air was cool on his tanned arms and neck. He brushed back his red, slightly grayed hair.

Just as he closed the door after him, he heard the squealing of metal rubbing on metal. He wasn't sure if it was the screen-door hinge, or something outside. He moved the door. It didn't squeal. He listened. The box elder whispered. A shingle stirred above them.

Then, there it was. The windmill. Once again the boy had forgotten to turn it off.

In an instant Pier flamed. "Teo!"

At the crack of the whipping voice, the boy sprang to his feet. "Ya. Ya, Pa."

Near the stove, Nertha turned, her eyes meek and evasive too.

"Did you shut off that windmill tonight? Like I told you?"

"I think so."

"Did you?"

"Well . . . no. I guess I forgot."

" 'I forgot.' Teo, Teo. When in God's name are you gonna keep your mind on your work?" Pier reached out a seizing hand, grabbed the boy's shoulder in a powerful vising grip. " 'Forgot.' Get out there an' shut it off. March."

The boy cringed.

"Git!"

"But . . . I ain't got my shoes on, Pa."

"That's your hard luck. Besides, it won't hurt you none to go barefoot. Many's the time I did it when I was young. An' it never hurt me. Made a man a me."

Teo slipped out of his grasp, reached for his shoes under the stove.

"I said, go barefoot."

Teo drew back.

"You damned snotnosed kids, you got too much to say nowadays. Got things too danged easy. Machines, books, toys. Why, when I was young, by God, I hadda work. An' I mean work. Sweat. Work. Like it says in the Bible. But you kids? Paugh. What you kids call work is fun."

Teo looked sullenly at the floor.

"What's that? What's that? You talkin' behind my back?"

"No."

"Wal, you better not. Now git."

Nertha put her hand on the boy's narrow shoulder. "Pier, now——"

Pier pushed her aside. "If he's big enough to drive the trotters, he's big enough to go barefoot."

Teo asked weakly, "Can't the mill wait till mornin'?"

Pier readied his foot again. "You goin'?"

"Sure."

Pier remembered something from his own youth, asked, "You ain't scared a the dark, are you?"

Teo said nothing.

"Ho. A big feller like you an' scared a the dark?"

"It ain't that——"

"For the last time. Git."

Teo padded to the door.

Pier aimed a kick, missed. Aimed another, missed. Each time the boy managed to dodge the striking foot.

Boiling up at his failure to hit the boy, gorging up at the boy's show of resistance, Pier ran after him into the dark. He caught the speeding lad beneath the box elder, let fly another boot. The kick hit, sank into the boy's soft bottom with sodden impact.

The boy yelped, stumbled, fell, got to his feet, tried to run.

Once more Pier connected.

Teo flopped to earth, lay prone.

Pier stood breathing over him, hoarsely.

Then Nertha was upon him in the dark. She shrilled, "Kill him, you fool. Go ahead, kill him."

Pier opened his mouth, surprised that anyone should dare to break into his anger.

"Go ahead, kill him, I tell you. Kill him." She grabbed his arm fiercely. "Kill him. Kill him, I say."

"Wal, now, woman, don't be foolish. I was only givin' him what he had comin'."

"Kill him!" she screamed. "Then you'll be happy."

At their feet, Teo slowly picked himself up and stumbled away into the dark toward the mill.

4. SING WHILE YOU MAY

. 1 .

IT WAS A WARM DAY, THE TWENTY-FOURTH OF December. The morning sun was bright.

Slushing around in the wet snow, Pier was busy winter-banking the north and west sides of the house with stringy, red-brown horse manure when Goldfish Gil the cream hauler drove down the lane.

Without slackening his speed, Goldfish Gil made a wide turn on the yard. Snow and mud and water sprayed out in a looping, majestic parabola, some of it flying beyond the box elder and sprinkling the side of Pier's face. Goldfish Gil jammed on the brakes. The cream truck stiffened and skated sideways against the gate and the milk rack.

Pier stepped up, wiping the watery mud from his face with a curved finger, setting his fork against the woodshed. "Someday ye're gonna hit Nertha right square in the eye through the window, an' then y'u'll catch hell."

Goldfish Gil, sitting upright, cocked an eye, doffed his corduroy cap, blaffed, "Fast an' snappy. That's me." The blocky man laughed.

Pier smiled. Though he remembered Ol' Spit Triggs's story about Goldfish Gil's long fingers around women, he still found himself admiring the braggart. "Wal, I suppose y'u'd like some cream?"

"If the cat ain't got to it yit, yep."

Pier grinned, nodded.

He stepped into the kitchen. He heard Nertha moving above him upstairs and he called out, "Need any butter?"

Her voice was surprisingly lively. "Two pounds, I guess. But wait. I'll come down and look myself."

"Okay." Pier picked up two five-gallon cans of cream, banged through the door, shagged them down the walk toward the cream truck.

Nertha came out of the house a few seconds later, her head enveloped in a gray shawl. She smiled gaily at Goldfish Gil. Pier raised a red brow.

Goldfish Gil chirped, "Ah. Hello, Mrs. Frixen. An' how are you today?"

"Oh, fine. Good."

"Sure a nice day for December, ain't it?"

"Yes. Very nice." Nertha drew the shawl close around her face. For the moment she seemed young again. Her voice sparkled with life.

Goldfish Gil opened a can, dipped in a long-handled ladle, deftly poured a palmful of cream into a small sampling jar, capped it. He tested the second five-gallon can. He shook off the drops from the ladle, slicked off the rest with a long red tongue. He licked his lips a few times. He smiled, nodded. "Yessir. You people always got good cream."

"It's a trick."

Goldfish Gil laughed. He looked quickly at Nertha, looked to one side. The brown, uncertain eyes in the storm-reddened face of the man became alive with a hidden thought.

Pier narrowed his brows together.

"Ya, so it goes," Goldfish Gil said meaninglessly.

Pier remembered that the man liked to gossip. He needled a question into him. "Wal, Mr. Windjammer, what's the bad news today?"

"There ain't much news to speak of."

"Ain't you peddlin' no peppered-up lies today?"

"No. There ain't no news. 'Cept, a course, that the Wall Street millionaires are hangin' an' shootin' theirsel's. All goin' nuts, they say."

"Oh?"

"Yeh. Plumb nuts."

"Is that so," Nertha said, crossing her arms over her breast and shaking her head as if some dear friend had died.

"Yeh." Goldfish Gil picked up a ledger, crossed his brows, made a few quick entries, looked up, once more smiling gaily. "Yeh. It's pretty bad, they say. Thousands a millionaires in New York goin' crazy, goin' broke, goin' nuts. Shootin' their wives an' daughters, jumpin' into the ocean, jumpin' off skyscrapers, towers. Why, the police an' the hearses an' the undertakers can't get around fast enough to pick up all the dead millionaires ploppin' to the ground."

"Is that so."

"Yeh. An' all because the stock market's flopped. Investments ain't worth the paper they're written on any more. Only thing good is silver. An' gold, a course. But bills, bonds, receipts, stocks, the whole shebang, they ain't worth a continental."

Nertha shook her head. "That's what they get for serving Mammon. Bein' greedy. The wages of sin."

Goldfish Gil nodded. "Good riddance, I say."

"Say," said Pier, thickening his brow, "say, I wonder if my harness stock, the Great Northern Harness Company t'Minneapolis, is any good any more?"

"Huh. I heard that's gone kaput."

"I'll be a son of a gun."

"Yep. Only thing left that's good is the Drake Estate, I guess."

"That?"

"Yep."

Pier drew up his eyes. "With Blacktail behind it?"

Goldfish Gil shrugged, cagily backtracked. "Well, maybe that's no good no more either. Anyway, I do know, all the millionaires t'New York are dyin' by the millions."

Nertha cowled the shawl close around her brow. "I'm cold out here. Guess I'll go in." She turned, paused, asked, "Say, would you like a cup of coffee?"

Pier started. It was the first time in a long while that Nertha had invited someone in for coffee.

Goldfish Gil beamed. He swaggered. "Why, sure. Don't mind if I do." He winked at Pier. "Never turn down a nice warm cup a coffee, I say. Specially if it's made by as pretty a woman as yer wife is."

"Huh." Pier looked at his feet.

Nertha started up the walk. "Well, are you men comin'?"

"Y'u bet yer life we are," Goldfish Gil yelped.

"Take two pounds a butter in with you," Nertha added.

"Right you are."

Pier took off his boots on the cement steps outside.

Goldfish Gil, however, walked into the kitchen, slush, mud, snow and all.

"Better take them off," Pier called. "The old lady'll raise Cain if you dirty her floor."

"Oh, that's all right," Nertha said, smiling hospitably. "Just come right in. I still got to clean the floor anyway."

Pier stepped inside, glanced around. Except for Goldfish Gil's tracks, the floor shone. "Huh," he grunted to himself. He walked across the waxed surface in his socks, drew his armchair up to the table.

Nertha pointed to a chair near the door. "Gil, you kin take that chair there."

Goldfish Gil whipped off his cap, sat down, crossed his fat legs, hooked his cap over a knee.

Nertha went to the pantry, quickly got out cups and saucers, creamer and sugar, some cake. She got the ever ready coffeepot from the stove. She poured. She passed the cups around.

Goldfish Gil expanded. He swelled. He sipped slowly.

Pier asked, slowly sipping too, and turning his eyes away from the cocky porker, "Say, y'u heard anything about that t.b. testin' the guv'ment's doin'?"

Goldfish Gil sputtered, set down his cup. "Say, that reminds me. This morning the manager of the Co-op Creamery told me to tell you you had to get yer cows tested or we can't take yer cream no more."

"How do you know I ain't done it already?"

For a second Goldfish Gil's eyes were steady. "Did you?"

"No."

"That's what I thought." Goldfish Gil winked at Nertha. "You see, I know everything that goes on around here."

Slowly Pier set down his cup. With an effort he held himself calm. "Did the manager really tell you that?"

"Orders from headquarters."

"Why?"

"Full a bugs."

"An' what'll happen if I tell the Co-op to go stick it?"

Goldfish Gil shrugged. "Makes no diff to them. There's plenty other farmers with cream."

Nertha said uneasily, "Now, Pier. Now."

Pier ignored her. "Beside, I'm a member of the Co-op. I got a share. An' as long as I got a share, I got a say. They gotta take my cream, t.b. or no t.b."

Goldfish Gil troubled his coffee with a spoon. "Well, Pier, it ain't us that's doin' it. It's the guv'ment."

"T'hell with the guv'ment. They ain't never done nothin' fer me, an' I don't intend to do nothin' fer them."

Goldfish Gil looked down at his knees, as if he were ashamed for Pier. "Well, Pier, maybe you'll change yer tune when the guv'ment fellers come around."

"The hell I will. I'll fill 'em full a buckshot."

Nertha said, getting to her feet and pouring another round of coffee, "Now, now. As Gramma would say, bidimje."

Pier flushed. "I mean what I say an' I say what I mean."

Goldfish Gil flicked sarcastic eyes at him. "Even if Depity Blacktail comes with 'em?"

"If he comes, I'll soak the buckshot in turpentine."

"Words don't fill a sack, you know."

Pier jumped up. "Just let them bastards come on my yard. I'll show y'u!"

Goldfish Gil played with his spoon. Nertha blushed.

Pier roared, "I know about that fish game they're playin'. Them guv'ment vets are in cahoots with the big city stockyard commissioners. Get our cattle cheap, sell the meat high, an' run off with the difference gravy."

Goldfish Gil sipped his coffee.

Pier waved a righteous finger. "Ain't it true that every time the t.b. vets come an' test yer cows, the best ones go?"

"Well," Goldfish Gil admitted, "well, a lot a good cows go, all right."

"Damn right they do. Nosirree. I ain't lettin' them bastards on my yard."

Nertha reached over a hand, touched his. "Pier, now. Please don't do anything wild," she whined. "Please. Maybe them vets do mean all right. After all, men are reasonable creatures a God."

"Aw, get away." Pier threw her hand aside.

"Pier, there should be some way a goin' about this high-minded."

Pier whirled on her, waving a flaming finger. "High-minded? Huh. What do you know about that, you with squirrels in yer head?"

Nertha looked down at her feet. She said sullenly, "Men are reasonable creatures a God."

"The hell they are. Men are beasts. Like Goldfish Gil here." Pier saw Goldfish Gil start, quickly added, "An' like me here, fr' instance."

Nertha quieted. Her eyes glazed, became stupid again.

No one said anything.

Goldfish Gil finished his cake and coffee, left.

Later in the morning, after Pier had finished winter-banking the house, he drove in to see Herman Brackx.

He found that Goldfish Gil had been right. The Great Northern Harness Company, with its three-million-dollar capital, had declared bankruptcy. Pier was out eight hundred dollars.

. 2 .

Sure enough, while Pier was taking his after-dinner nap on the horsehair sofa, a car drove on the yard. The scurring sound of the horn awoke him. He lay for a moment prying his mind back onto the track of life.

Nertha came in. She hovered over him uncertainly. She whispered, hesitant, "Pier."

"Yeh."

"There's some people on the yard. I ain't never seen 'em before. Could it be the guv'ment already?"

"Naw."

"Better get up." Her whisper was noisy.

"Yeh." Pier swung his feet to the floor, sleepily pulled on his work shoes. Slowly he tied the strings, stiffly stood up. He moved into the kitchen. He rubbed his forehead. His mind felt numb. He looked out of the north window. Then stared. "Why, it's the Old Dreamer. Pederson. The snoop." He rubbed his chin. "But I don't know the other guy, though."

Nertha moved like a ghost behind him. "You better go see what they want."

"Hold yer horses, woman, hold yer horses. Rome wasn't built in a day." Pier pulled on his red-and-black mackinaw. He had once worn it for dress. He jerked on his four-bucklers, slapped his meal-dusty cap over his bunchy red hair, stepped outdoors. He strode down the walk, feeling bulky and mighty.

"Hi, neighbor," he greeted, gruff. "What's louse now?"

"Hello there." Pederson fingered his tan cap. He smiled. "Didn't get you up from a cat nap, did we?"

"Yeh. A little."

Pederson leaned against the front fender of a green Model A Ford. On the other side stood a bulky red-faced man. The man had a knowing, thick-lipped smile and a bulging belly. The man nodded.

Pier said, "It's all right though. Was gonner get up anyway."

"Good."

"I got some hay to haul today."

Pederson waved his hand to the stranger. "You know Dr. Overslough? Our new veterinarian? He's come up from around Sioux City."

"No."

"Doc, this is Mr. Frixen. Pier."

"Hello."

"Hi."

Pederson took off a glove, rubbed his thin nose. His wrinkled eyes were troubled. "Well, Pier, we won't bother you much. We're just checking up on the cows. You had yours tested yet?"

"No."

Pederson spoke slowly. He seemed to be choosing his words with great care. "I see you got your cattle out in the yard."

Pier grunted. "Wal, it's been pretty warm lately. Otherwise you can bet yer sweet life they'd be in the barn."

"I know." Pederson turned to Dr. Overslough. "Nice bunch, ain't they? Fat."

"Look fine," Dr. Overslough said shortly. His eyes narrowed cautiously. "Course, that don't always mean anything."

"That's true," Pederson said.

Pier stepped back a little. Chills ran over the back of his hands. Unconsciously he balled his fists.

Dr. Overslough turned, his rubber boots squinching in the snow. "Before you go getting your hay, can you help us get the cows inside?"

"Wal . . ."

"It won't take more than a minute," Pederson said pleasantly, opening his tan sheepskin.

Pier could feel Nertha's eyes boring into his back from her perch by the kitchen window. "I know. But I ain't aimin' to have my cows tested."

Dr. Overslough's lips bubbled up, as if he were going to protest. "But——"

Pederson laid a quick cooling hand on the other's shoulder. He turned to Pier. "Why not?"

"Wal, in the fust place, I don't think my cows got it. Besides, I don't like the way you guv'ment vets come bustin' on the yard, nosin' around. We farmers didn't vote to have our cows tested."

Pederson said, "But, Pier, it isn't a matter of voting. It's a matter of saving lives. Of saving babies. Mothers."

Pier's eyes filled with gray fury. "That's a lot a horse collar. An' you know it."

Dr. Overslough broke in. "Frixen, let me tell you something." He pushed his finger into Pier's chest. "A t.b. cow gives t.b. milk. And cream."

"Horse collar! Man, what do you think I am, dumb? I know it's a trick. A city-slicker trick to get our beef cheap."

"Oh, Pier, come now," Pederson chided. His owl eyes laughed at him. "Come now. Don't you trust the law-enforcement officers of our country?"

"No. The law and the city birds are all in cahoots. Everybody says so."

Dr. Overslough laid a rough, mittened hand on Pier's arm. His face glowed sweatily, as if from an inner heat. "Frixen, I've heard about you. You're one of these independent guys who always thinks he knows it better than the next. One of these fall guys who's always bumping his head——"

Pederson quickly interrupted. "Now, now, Doc. Don't blow your boiler. Take it easy." Pederson turned to Pier, smiled apologetically. "Doc, here, is a little quick-tempered. He's been fighting and arguing with farmers so long, he's gotten touchy. He's having a little trouble understanding that not every farmer who puts up a good stiff argument is a crook. Now, Pier, let's be reasonable about this. Let's sit down and talk this over, man to man."

"Reasonable?" Pier spouted, waving an arm. He pointed at the black-and-white cows munching contentedly by the feed bunks. "Look at them critters there. Do they look like they got t.b.? Them fat an' saucy cows, full a git an' go? Hell no. Why, they give so much milk my kid an' me's gotta milk 'em in shifts, our hands get so tired. Why——"

Dr. Overslough jumped in again. Sweat on his skin stirred up a faint aroma of after-shaving lotion. "Frixen, some of the fattest cows I tested showed up with enough t.b. to kill off all the rednecks in the state of Iowa."

Pier flamed. Redneck, eh?

Pederson's eyes crinkled with worry.

Pier said, "Pederson, Overslop, if I was you two I'd get into that car an' git."

"Now, now, Pier."

"I mean that. Nobody's testin' my cows today. Nor any day."

"Be reasonable, man," Pederson pleaded.

"Git the hell off my yard. March!"

"Now——"

Pier had enough. He whirled, ran to the house. He saw Nertha jerk guiltily back from the window. He jumped through the door. With dripping boots he sprang past her across the kitchen linoleum, picked up a box of shotgun shells from the closet beneath the stovepipe, grabbed his 12-gauge from its hook over the door, loaded it. He muttered, "The bastards. I'll show 'em."

Nertha sat down suddenly. She breathed loudly. "Pier. Man. Be reasonable. Please."

"Shut up." He cocked the hammer.

"All right then. Murder them! Murder them all! You killer!"

Pier slammed the door on her words.

He stalked down the walk. He saw Pederson and Dr. Overslough starting for the barnyard, saw them whirl to face him, saw them whiten.

Pier ran a few steps, stopped. With a quick lifting motion, he fired over their heads. BB's whistled over the yard, ricocheted off the corn crib.

"Git!" Pier yelled, breaking the gun, ejecting the empty shell, reloading.

Both Dr. Overslough and Pederson leaped for the car. Dr. Overslough stepped on the starter, had the Model A rolling before the older Pederson could seat himself. The car wheels spun, sprayed mud, shot up the lane with a lurch.

Pier bellowed triumphantly, fired over their heads once again.

· 3 ·

An hour later, just as Pier came up to the house to get a warm-up cup of tea, two cars came over the rise. They sped rapidly toward his lane. Pier recognized both cars instantly. One was Dr. Overslough's green Model A, the other was Blacktail's, a blue-green Buick.

Blacktail's car turned into the lane. The other stopped on the road by the mailbox.

Pier thinned his lips. Grimly, with jumpy fingers, Pier went into the house for his 12-gauge again.

By the time Blacktail had turned around on the yard and stopped, Pier was stepping down the walk, cocking his gun, Nertha trailing after, wringing her hands, shrilling.

Blacktail swung open the door, stepped around the car. He was dressed in a trim gray suit and a short brown sheepskin. He was wearing his deputy sheriff's badge. He unfastened the flap of his holster, flashed a .38. Blacktail's eyes were points of fine flint. A faint smile lay coiled beneath his mustache. "Frixen, I think you better put that blunderbuss away."

Pier slowed, hesitated. A volcano broke open in his brain. Blacktail and the milk rack became vague blurs.

"Better put it away," Blacktail said again, coolly, coming toward him with short wary steps. The slushy snow whooshed beneath the man's feet. "It's all over, Frixen, you son of a seine-slinger. Your outlaw days are done."

Pier's nostrils opened, trembled.

A soft hand fell on Pier's arm. "Please, Pier," Nertha whined. "Please, man."

He pushed her away. "Get the hell in the house where you belong, woman. This is man's work."

Blacktail stepped nearer. "Better give me that gun, Frixen. You'll only get into trouble with it."

"Come an' get it."

Blacktail shrugged, grinned, patted his .38. "Remember, this little boy can count faster than yours."

Pier gestured. "Stay where you are, mister." He aimed his 12-gauge at Blacktail's heart.

"Now . . ."

"Dammit, another step, an' I'll drill y'u."

Blacktail's feet stilled. "Now, Frixen, look. I'm going to give you one more chance. Do we test your cows peaceful, or must we come shooting?"

Once more Nertha tugged at him. "Oh, Pier, please. Haven't we had enough trouble in life? Pier."

Pier brushed her aside. "Depity, I'm givin' you just five seconds to clear off my yard. Hear?"

Blacktail grinned, moved stealthily closer, aiming his gun straight for Pier's eyes.

Pier began to toll. "One . . . two . . . three . . ."

Suddenly Blacktail leaped. With his left hand, he caught Pier a short chopping blow on the elbow. The 12-gauge went off, blasting a circling rent in the snow beside Blacktail's feet.

Yelping, Pier dropped his gun, grabbed his stinging elbow. Blacktail had clipped him on the funny bone.

Blacktail stood close, grinned, held his .38 on Pier. "Little wiser now, hey?" Blacktail reached down quickly, picked up Pier's gun. Blacktail turned to Nertha. "He got any more guns in the house, Mrs. Frixen?"

Nertha shook her head, too stunned to speak.

"Are you sure?"

"Oh. Yes. Yes, he has."

"Get it."

Whimpering, lightly shrilling, she fetched the .410.

Blacktail took it, broke it open, thrust the stock with its trigger works into the left great pocket of his sheepskin. He broke the 12-gauge too. Then he put away his .38. "There. Now we can talk like civilized human beings." He stepped up, held out his hand. "Shake? No? Come, man, let's be reasonable."

Pier growled, rubbed his sore elbow. For the moment he felt completely dominated by the quick-striking, deadly sure Blacktail.

"Got coffee on the stove?" Blacktail asked, turning easily to Nertha, casting a sudden warm smile at her.

"No. But I got tea. Will that do?" Nertha's voice was barely above a whisper.

"Good."

She ran to the house with pittering feet.

Blacktail called after, "Better set on two extra cups. There's more company coming." Blacktail stood on his toes, waved a slinging arm at the men sitting in the Model A on the road.

In a moment, the car started up and turned into the lane.

The two men stepped out cautiously. They threw quick glances at Pier; Pederson sadly, Dr. Overslough triumphantly.

Blacktail snapped at Dr. Overslough, "Wipe that grin off your face, Doc. We don't want any more trouble." He paused. "Come, Pier's invited us in for tea."

"Fine. Good. A cup of tea will be just right," Pederson said softly. He made a friendly gesture toward Pier.

Blacktail pointed. The men stepped toward the house, noisily stamping and scraping their feet on the walk. At the porch door, they took off their rubber boots and set them facing the sun.

Pier found himself taking off his boots too. He dusted straw and chaff out of his folded pant legs. He followed the men into the house. He felt numb.

The bulking men filled the kitchen. Nertha fluttered, hemhawed, ran from pantry to stove to table. With skittering feet she set out extra cups and saucers, cut the cake, poured out steaming amber tea. She tittered nervously to herself.

Blacktail sat easily in Nertha's chair, Pederson amiably at the north window, Dr. Overslough red and uneasy by the black reservoir of the range. Pier sat in his armchair at the table, holding his hand over the side of his face.

Blacktail sipped, said, "Ah, this hits the spot."

"Yessir," Pederson assented, "fine good tea."

"Oh . . . thank you," Nertha said breathlessly. "I really didn't have time . . . it's nice of you to say so . . . I just threw a little together."

Dr. Overslough bit off a piece of cake. "Ah, my favorite."

Nertha flushed with pleasure.

The tea bibbers slurped noisily together. Warm drink and cake mellowed them a little.

Blacktail said finally, "Well, Pier, now I can tear up that search warrant I swore out for you, can't I?"

Pier opened his eyes. Search warrant?

Pederson coughed. "Well, Frixen, I'm sorry I had to do that. But it was the only way we could get on your yard legally."

Dr. Overslough coughed too, swallowed.

Pier stared at his tea, muttered, "Suit yerself. I ain't beggin'."

Dr. Overslough leaned forward, set his empty cup on the table, drew up his chair, pointed a friendly finger. "Frixen, will you do me a favor?"

Pier looked up past his bushy red-brown brows. "Yeh?"

"Come to my office someday when you got time. At Rock Falls. I'll show some t.b. bugs to you. I got 'em under a microscope. I'll even take 'em out of the milk right in front of your eyes."

Pier grumbled, "Wal, I ain't sayin' there ain't no bugs in some milk. I'm only sayin' mine ain't got none."

"Are you sure?"

"Wal, no, I ain't, but any man—"

Nertha interposed. "More tea, Doctor?"

"Uh? Oh yes. Don't mind if I do. It's very good." Again Dr. Overslough turned to Pier. "Man, listen to me I'll lay all the money I've got in the world against anything you want to put up that at least two of your cows've got the bugs. Of course, naturally, not that I want them to have bugs. But that the law of averages says they got 'em."

"Huh."

"At least let me test them. It won't hurt none."

Pier flashed, "Go ahead. I ain't stoppin' you now, am I?" He glanced bitterly at Blacktail.

Pederson asked quietly, gravely, "You got any children, Pier?"

"You know I have. Teo."

"How old is he?"

"Goin' on twelve, I guess."

"He's the apple of your eye, not?"

"Wal, I don't exzactly hate him."

"Did you ever stop to think that right now, maybe today, right this minute, that boy of yours may be carrying t.b. bugs he got from your cows? That's a hard-iron fact you've got to think about, Pier."

Pier blinked.

"Really," Pederson purred on, "really. It could really be true."

Pier stood up. "Why pester me any more with all this talk? If you wanna test 'em, get goin'."

The men stood up.

Dr. Overslough said, "In three days you'll know, Frixen. Those that'll show up positive will have a little bump under the fold of their tail all the way from the size of a pea to a walnut."

"Look, mister. What else do you want? For me to get down on my hands an' knees?"

The men stepped outdoors.

Pier heard them put on their boots, heard them tramp down the walk.

Nertha touched his shoulder. "Oh, Pier, I'm so glad you didn't— "

"Shut up." He turned his face to the wall. In his mind he was already going down the long line of cows he owned, wondering which one would show up positive, hoping that if any did it would be Skinny, who was always slipping her calf, or Old Bones who had tried to cast her withers last week.

· 4 ·

At night Pier dreamt of scrawny cow tails. He saw rows of t.b. bubbles: pea-sized, walnut-sized, fist-sized. They grew out of cow rumps, on cow hips, in tail folds. His dreams were so real that, when he awoke in the morning, he could scarcely tell fact from fiction.

He was sure the first day that all the cows except Princess showed tuberculin swellings. He didn't know whether to weep or shout.

The second day he was sure Princess had it and the rest not.

He kept the gutters clean. He scrubbed the cows' udders, their black dandruffy tails. He bathed their tail folds. He fretted, watched, waited.

Then, to complicate things, Princess, Susabelle, Skinny, Old Bones seemed to show signs of calving. Their uteri began to dilate, their udders to swell.

He penned them up together, watered them, fed them, waited. He noticed that Skinny and Old Bones sometimes coughed.

The third day came. It was also the old Frisian fire-offering day.

Dr. Overslough came at nine, just after Pier had finished his morning cup of coffee, and Nertha and Teo had left for town to get groceries.

Pier met the thick-necked veterinarian at the head of the walk. "Where's yer friend Pederson? The Old Dreamer?"

"Oh, he's out somewhere in the country. Looking for untested cattle."

"Uh-huh." Pier pulled his dusty cap down over his eyes. He scuffed in the loose slush of the yard. The sun glinted on the hood of the veterinarian's car.

Dr. Overslough picked up a bag. He threw open his brown coat. He tossed back his cap from his sweating forehead. Wrinkling, he glanced at Pier. "Well, I guess we're ready to have a look. Still locked up?"

"Yeh."

They sloshed toward the barn.

Pier asked, "Say, Doc, what about cows with calves?"

"If they react, they go too."

"Uh-huh. An' if the calf's born before the test's done?"

"They're yers. T.b. ain't hereditary. It's infectious."

"Oh." Pier opened the barn door. He tried to laugh. "Wal, Doc, you know, I got a half a notion to keep you out of the barn for a while."

Dr. Overslough looked up, worried. "Why?"

"Wal, four a my cows are ready to throw. Their cords are falling already. I'd sure like to get them calves, Doc."

Dr. Overslough's face cleared. He laughed, "Frixen, we'll have a look-see. Maybe we can do something for you on that score."

"I sure hope so."

The barn was sweet with the smell of crushed straw and fresh green dung. The hoarfrost on the walls was melting. A warm, gentle animal mist rose steadily and slowly from the floor to the joists above. Bits of green-gray, still steaming silage lay strewn in the feeding alleys. Tufts of faded alfalfa hung through the openings of the haymow above.

Pier stirred up the cows. "C'mon, you lazy pokes. Up with y'u. Suwch. Sa. Get up, an' yi now. C'mon, you lazybones."

Slowly the black-and-white camel-clumsy cows got to their feet. Some craned necks in the stanchions to peer at the men.

Dr. Overslough started down the line of cows, examining rumps. He stepped carefully over mounds of fresh green dung.

Pier lighted his corncob pipe. He fiddled it in and out of his mouth.

Dr. Overslough leaned over, once, twice, nodded. "This one's okay. And this one. Okay. Okay." He stepped along quickly. Coming to the sixth cow, he hesitated. "Well, this one is questionable. I dunno." He patted the Frisian-Holstein. "I think she's all right, though. Yeh, I guess I kin let her pass. Maybe try her again in a month or two."

Pier heaved a deep sigh of relief. "About how many do the farmers average here'bouts?"

"I never stopped to figure. Some lose all."

Pier picked a straw from the back of a cow, began to chew on it alongside his pipestem.

"And some don't lose any. You see, it depends."

"Uh-huh."

"This one is all right. So is this one. And this one."

Then Dr. Overslough stopped behind an old, bony cow.

Pier hastened up, bit his teeth. It was his favorite, Maybelle, daughter of Âlde Beppe.

"Frixen, I guess here's your first one."

"No."

"Well, you can see for yourself. See that bubble there?"

Pointed out, Pier recognized it.

"I'm sorry, Frixen."

"An' it's old Maybelle yet," Pier murmured. "Old Maybelle."

Dr. Overslough hurried on. "This one's okay. This one." He reached the end of the line. "And this one." He paused. "Well, that wasn't so bad, Frixen. Only one in this whole bunch. Now we'll have a look-see at those over there." He pointed to the four calving black-and-whites.

Pier said quickly, thinking he might be able to forestall calamity by making a prediction, "Wal, if any a my cows got it, it'll be them two skinny ones. Old Bones an' Skinny. They're always coughin'."

Dr. Overslough said nothing. He rolled his shoulders. He drew in his belly, pressed his fat body so forcibly through a narrow stanchion he blew air.

Pier followed him, stepped into the pen with him. He put his pipe away. The straw in his mouth was frayed to bits and he spat it out. He picked up another, began to chew on it furiously.

Dr. Overslough leaned over, slapped Skinny on the rump, looked, slapped her again. "She's okay." He cracked Old Bones with a stubby fist. "And this one too. By God, Frixen, you were almost right. You have got a good herd."

Pier's hopes fired up. "Wal, that's what I thought, but . . ."

Dr. Overslough examined Princess. "Oh-oh. Here's one. And no question about it. Look."

"What?" Pier leaned down.

"Look. See."

Pier saw it. Her bubble was as big as a pigeon egg.

"Sorry, Frixen."

"But . . ." Pier wrestled with himself. He tried to speak calmly. "Why, but she's . . ."

"Sorry." Dr. Overslough turned to Susabelle, rubbed her gently. "Here's a hell of a nice cow. Helluva."

Pier said nothing.

Dr. Overslough walked around her, lifted her tail. "And, by God, she's got it."

Pier's fist tightened. He bit through the straw.

"Sorry. Dammit. Such a nice cow too."

Pier turned away. "Not Susabelle. Not her," he murmured.

Dr. Overslough whipped out a notebook, wrote in it. "Yessir. Just three bad cows. One questionable. Not bad at all, Frixen. You should feel mighty lucky. Well, thing to do now is call up a trucker

and have them shipped immediately. Pronto. Where do you usually ship?"

Pier blinked. With an effort he managed to clear his eyes, hold his voice steady. "Sioux Falls."

"Your commissioner?"

"Must you know all that?"

"Sure. Just routine checking. Not that you won't comply with the law, but some farmers've got to be checked up on."

"Smith, then."

"Good." Dr. Overslough jotted, closed his book with a snap. "That does it." He rolled his shoulders. "Well, I'm off. Got a lot of checking to do this morning. So long. Good luck."

"Thanks."

After the door closed, Pier stood quietly a moment, looking at Susabelle and Princess. Through filming tears he saw them only as wavering outlines.

Collecting himself, he went to the house, telephoned Red Joe to come with his truck.

He smoked another pipeful, considered, decided he might as well put a full load on the truck. Hauling but three cows was wasting space. He went to the hog house, studied his fatteners, selected twenty roly-poly swelling barrows, locked them up in a pen. He fed them corn, some salt, turned up the flame in the self-waterer. The hogs would reach the stockyards scale full to bursting with weight.

He smoked another pipeful, thought about the junk pile behind the grove, decided some city junk dealer might be glad to relieve him of the old walking cultivator and Teo's dismantled car motor.

A half hour later, opening the barn door, he was instantly aware of a strange, wonderful odor. He sprang inside. He needled his body through a stanchion. There before his widening, amazed eyes were four little calves stumbling and bumping around. At first he was sure all four cows had calved. But looking around, he saw Old Bones lying on her side, still getting ready; and just beyond her, old Skinny, also making her nest. He hit his fist on an upraised knee. Wal. Both Princess and Susabelle had thrown twins then. Twins!

He sat down on his heels. Numb, blinking, he watched Princess lick her calves, saw Susabelle give suck to hers.

By the time he had carried the viscous afterbirths away, Skinny and Old Bones were at it. They had singletons.

Twins and singletons. Ae, what could a man say to such strange doings?

· 5 ·

Pier sat with Red Joe in the waiting room of the livestock commissioner's office, smoking a fat cigar.

A blond, bold-faced clerk came to the mist-glass pay window, waved a sheaf of papers at Pier.

Red Joe jumped up. "Must be the check already. Come on." He bowlegged ahead of Pier.

Pier got up, brushed cigar ashes off his new blue-black mackinaw.

Red Joe said over his shoulder, "Smoke's so danged thick here a man kin shovel it out."

"Yeh."

Red Joe leaned on the glass counter. He took the papers, glanced at them, tore off one of the sheets, pocketed it. "That's my check. The rest is yers. Receipt an' check." He rolled a wad of tobacco from one cheek to the other, cleaned his tongue with a quick spit to one side.

Pier winked at Red Joe, nudged him, then put on a show of suspicion before the clerk. "Hey, not so fast there, you horse thief. Let me see what you stuck in yer pocket there."

Red Joe instantly returned the wink, said, "Aw, go to grass, you claim jumper. If you wasn't such a sap, I'd cut you down to my size."

"You an' whose army?" He grabbed Red Joe by the scruff of his neck, with one arm lifted the short fellow onto the plate-glass counter. "Now, you little squirt, pony up or I'll make a grease spot out of you."

"Hey, hey," the skinny blond clerk said fussily, glancing around, "if you two want to fight, go outside."

Red Joe's eyes held steady for a moment, then wrinkled merrily. "What's the matter, rattlebones, don't you like fun?"

"Sure, sure. Now. Will you sign your John Henry to your receipt, Mr. Frixen? Right here?"

Pier sobered. "Yeh. Sure."

"Here's a pen." The skinny man jumped a desk fountain pen at him.

Pier looked at the onion-stem pen, took it up gingerly. Chewing on his cigar, he scratched out *Pier Frixen* on the dotted line.

"That's it. Thank you."

Pier mumbled, turned to go.

Outside on the steps, they came upon groups of blue-clad, red-necked farmers and knots of brown-dressed, fancy-hatted buyers and sellers. Both Pier and Red Joe stood bewildered a moment.

"You hungry?" Red Joe asked.

"Yeh. Could stand a bite."

"Well, let's go down to Nell's Café there then."

"Okay."

They entered a noisy den of eaters: farmers, salesmen, herders, buyers. A tumble of noise dinned into Pier's ears. He was stunned by it.

Red Joe led the way to two high seats before a counter. They sat down.

Red Joe took his quid of tobacco out of his mouth with a crooked finger, rolled it up carefully in his handkerchief. "A good chew don't come along every day," he said, grinning.

Pier laid his half-smoked, half-chewed cigar on the edge of the counter.

Half of the seats were filled with hunching, gulping men. A fog of smoke hung low in the room.

Pier felt the eyes of people on him. He swaggered a little, thinking of the fat check in his pocket, of the good luck he had had not to have lost more cows than he did.

They each ordered a brown-gravied beefsteak sandwich, a piece of apple pie, a cup of coffee.

Pier ate silently, munching, looking around.

He was about finished when Red Joe asked, as he wiped up the last of his gravy with a piece of bread, "Well, scissor bill, shall we head home or have some fun?"

"Wal, we still got to visit a junk yard yit, you know."

"I ain't forgot. But I thought maybe you'd like to take in an afternoon show."

"That's an idee."

Red Joe opened his mackinaw, pulled out a cheap watch. The face on it was yellow from the oil of man sweat, its nickel worn off, brass showing through. "Hell, it's only one o'clock. We got a lot a

time. You seen one a them talkin' shows yit? Where they talk at y'u like a livin' human bein'?"

"No, I ain't."

"Sight fer sore eyes." Red Joe turned to a waitress. He waved.

She came up. She was a tall, dark-haired, plain-faced woman. She slowly wiped a coffee cup. "Yeh?" Her eyes were blue-gray.

"Say, Susy, what's a good show in town?"

"Matinee?"

"That's it."

She stared at Red Joe frostily. "In the first place, my name ain't Susy."

"Hoity-toity!" Red Joe teased. "Hoity-toity." He turned to Pier, hooking a thumb in her direction. "Hey, this sugar cooky's got class."

Pier grinned. He marveled at Red Joe's ease around strange women. He recalled the story of Goldfish Gil and Edna.

Red Joe turned to the waitress again. "What was that, Miss Blister?"

She said nothing.

"Come, come. Tell us. What's a good show in town?"

She started to turn away.

"Well, hell, then we'll go see a grand op'ry, if that's the way you feel about it."

She stopped, lifted interested eyes. "You like grand op'ry?"

Red Joe spat. "Hell no. Come, tell us about the shows in town."

She cooled. "Well, there's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. That's at the State."

Red Joe stirred, his short curved legs crossing under his seat. "Say, that's it."

The waitress said, still wiping the coffee cup, "Of course, if you really want to see something that's got uplift to it, go see the op'retta at the Masonic Temple."

"Op'retty? Woman, you couldn't drag me to one."

"It's called *The Countess Maritza*." The waitress's eyes were suddenly soft with a dream. Her plain face became mellow with an inner light.

"Say!" Pier exclaimed, suddenly recollecting. "Judas Priest, if that ain't what I got on my phonygraph t'home."

"It is?" The waitress beamed. "Oh, that's wonderful. Oh, I know you'll like it. I saw it. It's got . . . uplift. It's wonderful."

"Aw hell," Red Joe growled, "aw hell. Now we're in fer it. C'mon, Pier, let's head fer home."

"Why, don't you like good music?" Pier exclaimed.

"No, goddammit."

"Why, man, ye're missin' half yer life."

"Mister, y'u kin have it fer all a me." Red Joe scowled at the waitress. He raised a playful, threatening arm. "As fer you . . . *puertt!*"

The waitress set down the cup. She brushed her blue uniform. She smiled sweetly. "It just goes to show," she said, smiling at Pier, "it just goes to show that songs is fer them that sings. Not fer swine."

"Aw hell." Red Joe stood up, growling. He unrolled his handkerchief, gulped up the quid of tobacco into his cheek again. He ambled toward the cashier. "Imagine. A waitress talkin' about uplift. Holy smokes."

Pier followed, picking up his half cigar. "Wal, Red Joe, I don't know what ye're gonna do, but, cripes, man, I'd sure like to see that op'retty."

Despite Red Joe's damnations, they parked near the Masonic Temple, bought a ticket, went inside. The performance was about to start. The lofty temple was half filled. A few thin golden threads of sunlight slanted past drawn shades on the south side. Ushers walked along like stealthy cats, whispering behind printed programs, craning necks to look at seats obviously empty.

Pier and Red Joe approached the tallest usher.

The usher glanced at their overalls, drew up his nose. Daintily, distantly, he led Pier and Red Joe to a rear seat far to one side, nervously gave them a program. Then he flapped back to the door, began to titter with another usher.

Pier took off his cap, tried to hook it over his knee, found the seat ahead in the way, twisted around, finally put his cap on the floor. He combed his unruly red hair with a coarse hand, sniffed his nose quietly. He felt bulky in the narrow seat.

Red Joe slumped down.

"Big place," Pier whispered. His voice sounded unnaturally sibilant.

"Yeh. Could hold a good hoedown in it," Red Joe said aloud.

Instantly two toothpick-thin women ahead turned around, looked sharply at them.

Red Joe thumbed his nose.

"Hey," Pier warned. To him the temple was a holy place. He couldn't understand Red Joe's sacrilegious attitude. "They're probably nice people," he added. "At least show a little respect."

Red Joe grunted. "Most likely some old-maid aunts. Can't tell me a decent normal woman'd want to waste her afternoons in here." Red Joe twisted in his seat. "Like that blister down at Nell's. What wimmen like that need is a man." Red Joe scrunged around again. "By God, they must a built these seats fer kids. This one's too narrer fer my hind end. How about yers?"

Pier moved around a little. "Wal, it's tight all right, but I kin get along in it. Maybe if you was to take yer mittens out a yer back pocket, an' 'ud take off that oversized sheepskin, you'd fit."

Red Joe took off his coat, pulled out his mittens. "Still too tight."

"You must be wearin' two overalls then."

"Wearin' three."

"Shh!" the two spear-thin women shushed.

"Aw, go pull in yer necks, you hay bags," Red Joe retorted.

Just then the house lights went out, the light in the pit came on, the first strains of the orchestra came up. Trailing music lifted, filled the temple with golden lilting music.

Red Joe stilled. His body stiffened, his covert eyes roved.

The thin ladies turned to the stage.

Pier listened. The overture built to a climax. The slivers of sunlight stabbing past the long, black shades became mellow.

There was a pause. Then the majestic, folding, red curtain opened. Before him spread a new world.

Dark-eyed maidens adorned with silver shawls, yellow dresses tinkling bells whirled before him.

A maiden sang alone. Her voice was as clean as a drop of morning dew.

A crashing chorus flashed corn-tassel gold. Pier was enchanted.

Red Joe itched in his seat, looked around in the dark.

"What's louse?" Pier asked, irritated.

"Damn place ain't got no spittoon."

The two old ladies ahead turned again, shushed them with a throat-cleaning "Shhh!"

Red Joe eyed them. "Damned old hens. I'll bet them gray purties've got old purple pimples somewheres."

Pier couldn't help but grin. He felt torn between his loyalty to Red Joe and his hunger for melody. "Wal, it'll soon be over."

The sneering usher came up, whispered. "If you gentlemen can't keep quiet I'll have to ask you to leave. Have to."

Red Joe sat as if he hadn't heard.

"It's all right," Pier said, "it's all right. My friend here's just feelin' a little horsy today."

Again the old maids looked around.

"*Puerrt!*" Red Joe blew at them. "*Puerrt* on you!"

"Please, I'll have to ask you to leave."

Red Joe stood up suddenly. "We paid our way, didn't we?"

"Yes, but——"

Red Joe whipped out his jackknife, opened the long blade, flashed it in the vague light.

The usher jumped back, paled to a faint mauve. Then he hurried with wasp-quick feet through the door into the hall.

Pier turned to the stage again. A lament, a plaint, crept into the music. The violins sobbed. A cello moaned.

A new maiden, a maiden like easygoing Kaia, tripped forth. She lifted a lithe arm, raised a bird-sweet voice, broke up the sad falling accents with a song:

"Dance, gypsy, play, gypsy,
Sing while you may."

Instantly the merry girls and dangle-bright gallants swirled in a joyous dance around the maiden, clapping their hands, crashing their castanets. Pier thought of orange-red orchard leaves whirling in fall winds.

A heavy hand fell on Pier's shoulder. He glanced up. A bulking blue-coated man leaned over them. A silver star on the man's chest twinkled in the dim light. "Will you boys step outside a minute?" The voice was pitched low, crackled with power.

Without a thought of resisting, Pier stood up.

Red Joe muttered, picked up his mittens and coat, stood up too. He shambled ahead of Pier.

They came blinking into the sudden light of the hallway.

"What's the matter?" Pier asked. Through the door he could hear the lyric rising again:

"Dance, gypsy, play, gypsy,
Sing while you may."

"Nothing. 'Cept you birds"—the hard-eyed cop glanced at their farm clothes, smiled a little—" 'cept you boys are raisin' a little too much Cain."

"But we paid——" began Pier.

"Aw hell," Red Joe growled, shrugging his shoulders, "we're well rid of that place. Let's go home." Red Joe turned to the cop. "You kin tell them nuts in there that they can stick their tickets right up their fanny."

Pier hesitated. He longed to see the rest; and yet, with Red Joe owning the truck, he really had nothing to say. Reluctantly he followed Red Joe outdoors.

They got into the truck. Red Joe started it up, wheeled out of the parking lot, headed down toward Commerce Street.

In a few moments Pier saw a sign on a wall of wood palings surrounding a yard: JUNK IT AT PLUNKETT. Piled against the high wall lay heavy rusted steel frames.

Red Joe drove around the yard twice, trying to find a gate. "Hell," Red Joe said at last, "just like always, they're scared somebody's gonna steal a tin can."

Pier mumbled.

Red Joe drove around once more, then parked at the end of the block and across the street.

Pier opened his door, stepped out, paused to light his pipe. He brushed tobacco crumbs from his stiff new blue-black mackinaw.

They started down the street. Ahead, to their left, stood a row of weathered shacks.

Pier pointed. "D'you suppose people actually live in them?"

"Sure. Sioux Indians. Niggers. Chinamen. Whites. They sometimes call this the All Nations Street."

"Say, maybe this is where that All Nations baseball club comes from."

"Could be." Pier studied the first shack. A broken coaster wagon lay in the melting snow. A grayed, worn broom leaned against a chipped door. White starched curtains were the only cheer.

One of the curtains moved. A high-yaller face appeared, gold teeth gleaming, smile wide to the ears, thick lips sensual. Twice the light mulatto twiggered an uplifted come-on finger toward them.

"Say," Pier exclaimed, "by God, she wants us t'come in." He grinned. " 'Tain't time fer tea yit, is it?"

Red Joe stopped in his tracks. His eyes opened in astonishment. "Pier. Holy Smokes. I didn't know you was that dumb."

Pier reddened, sniffed. "Dumb?"

"Yeh."

"Wal, look at her wavin' there then."

"May my rotted guts burn in hell if this don't beat all fer dumbness. Man, that bed bunny ain't offerin' tea. She's offerin' nooky. Wanna give her yer nice fat check?"

Pier bit on his teeth.

Red Joe spat to one side, started down the street again. "Of all the dumb ones I ever heard or saw, this one takes the cake."

"Wal, I didn't know," Pier protested. "I figgered she was a human bein', like me, an' just wanted to be sociable."

"Sociable, yeh." Red Joe spat. "Course, don't get me wrong. Not that I'm agin bein' sociable that way. An' with Negroes. Sioux Indians. They're fine people. But it's that I'm struck dumb by yer dumbness."

Pier growled. "Like I said, I didn't know. An' what I don't know I don't know."

"Huh."

Then another memory prodded Pier. "Say, is this where you went to find that friendly colored gal you talked about that time we went huntin'?"

"That's right. Now ye're perkin'."

"Oho."

They passed the second shack, the third, the fourth. In each the curtains moved slightly and bright-faced whores, some white, some yellow, some red, some black, twiggered come-on fingers at them. One was blue-faced, and she showed a knee at the window. A frayed silk garter bound the top of a rumpled stocking.

Red Joe laughed, spat.

They crossed the street, walked up to a small door in the junkyard wall. Both Red Joe and Pier leaned against it, and, creaking

like an old windmill, it opened. They entered a vast, block-long, block-wide arena of rusting junk.

Pier walked along slowly, eying old gray corn grinders, shellers, walking plows, tin lizzies, fenders, taillights, thousands of metal shapes and forms.

Suddenly a piece of animated gray junk stirred beside him.

Pier jumped.

The gray piece of junk grumped hoarsely, "Ya? What you want?" It was the junkman. The dirt-stiff fellow's white-ghost eyes flicked at Pier. They were like Negro eyes.

Red Joe said, " 'Lo. Friend a mine here's got some junk he'd like to dump. Open the gate, wherever the hell you got it, an' I'll drive my truck in."

"Ya." The junk dealer nodded. He looked suspiciously at them. "Over there."

When they were back in the truck, Pier said, taking his corncob pipe slowly from his mouth, "Holy horse collar. I never knew human bein's could get so low. Judas Priest. Such a hog. Why, compared to him, we're as clean as angels."

Red Joe grunted, started up the motor.

"An' them whores there. Why, I ain't seen the beat. Compared to them, my wife's a queen, even though she didn't give me another boy this year. A green-eyed queen." Pier's eyes opened. "Why, you know, seein' people like that makes you realize how good you got it."

Red Joe snorted. "Pier, ye're a first-class pharisee."

Just before going to bed, at midnight, Pier went to the barn and gave the cows an extra forkful of hay, the calves a second helping of milk.

He was throwing out a warming mound of hay for the birds when, out of the whirl of white sky feathers flying down, a snowbird chirped at him, "Chit-chee. Chit-chee."

Pier said, "G'morn. Sint Steffens hoarn."

BOOK FOUR

THE EARTH HAS A FEVER

1. THE LILY OF THE VALLEY

• I •

"," RED JOE SAID, JUMPING DOWN FROM HIS PERCH ON the partition. "Let's go have some fun. See the sights. It'll be awhile yet before they post the winners. Besides, if that bag a bones a yers wins a prize, my runts are champions."

Pier stroked the back of his yearling calf. In the afternoon sunlight streaming down through the skylights of the Rock Falls County Fair cattle pavilion, the calf's black and white hairs shone. Pier had given it a brushing with a currycomb dipped in kerosene. "Wal, Red Joe, I ain't exzactly in the mood fer fun today."

Red Joe spat to one side, chewed his quid a few times, rubbed his

wrinkling, aging face, spat the whole quid out. He bit off a fresh bite. "Here, take one. Good fer what ails y'u."

"No."

"Sure. Take a chew. Good fer yer teeth."

"Naw." Pier pushed his felt hat back on his head. He scratched his silvering ruddy hair.

"Take one. It'll kill the tapeworm that's eatin' you."

"No. But I'll take some smokin' tobacco. I'm plumb out." The wrinkles around Pier's eyes deepened into a squint.

"Take a chew. Won't hurt none. Take the place of a smoke."

"Oh wal, all right." Pier bit off a triangle, chewed slowly. Quick saliva sprinkled in his mouth. He began to spit.

"There. Now you'll start feelin' better right away," Red Joe said.

"Huh. That I've got to see."

Red Joe scratched underneath his new overall, pushed his cap back, spread out his bowed legs, studied Pier with explorative eyes. "Now what the hell kin be ailin' a big moose like you?"

Pier sat down on the edge of the partition, pulled down his hat over his graying head. The yearling followed him, tried to suck his finger. With lifted tail it bucked him lightly. "I dunno. I guess I'm long on guts an' short on brains." He took out his jackknife, began to whittle into the top plank of the partition.

"C'mon. Spill it. You pessimistic pickle. Tell Uncle Joe."

"Oh rats, you know what's wrong. The country's as dry as an old maid's tit. Dust." Pier seesawed the knife blade back and forth.

Red Joe grunted, leaned against the side of the calf pen too.

Pier scratched his nose. He spat. The tobacco was too sweet. He gazed at the crowd of men standing on the far side of the pavilion. He wondered if the cattle judges had yet made up their minds. "You know how it is. The last four years we've all been fallin' behind. We might just as well have spent our time playin' hide-the-weenie with our wives."

"Pier, you look at the dark side a things too much."

Pier sighed. In his mind, he went over the years. In '30 there had been fair grain and hay, but no corn. In '31 there had been no crop to speak of at all. In '32, with no grain or hay, the corn had dropped to fifteen cents a bushel on the market. He sighed again. He made another gash into the soft plank, studied what he had cut out, seesawed once more, and then, satisfied with the inscription: *P.F. 1933*,

closed the knife and dropped it back in his pocket. "If only we could a had a good year this year. If only. I might have been able to keep up my interest on the mortgage. But we didn't. So all that work is gone. Gone. Gone with the money I stuck into that Great Northern Harness Company. Gone. I tell you, Red Joe, two more years of this an' Blacktail'll take over the whole works. Both farms."

"That son of a bitch," Red Joe growled, kicking the straw in the alley.

"Red Joe, someday that smut-smellin' proud-belly is gonna own all of us. Renters, mortgagers, hired hands. Lock, stock, an' barrel."

"Still it won't be him so much that'll own us. It'll be them Wall Street insurance companies that he's receiver fer."

"It's the same thing, whether Blacktail or Wall Street gets it. I'll still be a bum in the end." Pier sighed. "Yeh, when Chauncey MacIntosh's bank failed, we lost something. Chaunce was a tightwad, but he was fair."

Red Joe shook himself. "This talk is drivin' me nuts. C'mon, let's go have ourselves some fun while we kin yit."

Pier rambled on. "What's really got me sore is that siren Blacktail put in the town tower. Boy, how I miss them bells."

Red Joe tugged at him. "C'mon."

"Man, I ain't slept decent since they was took out. Listenin' to that whistle is like listenin' to all the devils in hell howlin' in tune."

"Dammit, Pier, yer yammer's worse than my old lady's."

"By God, sometimes I got a half a notion to join the Farmers' Holiday Association. For all the money I've made this year, God knows I might just as well take a holiday."

Red Joe thumped him on the back. "Aw, c'mon. You ain't the only one who's gonna lose his farm."

Pier looked up. "Who else?"

"Me."

"You?"

"Sure, you dumb nut. A course. Any day now Blacktail'll call the sheriff an' hold a foreclosure sale on my Lily of the Valley."

Pier wrinkled his brow. "Lily?"

"That's what my old man called it. He came out here alone, you know. Like yer dad did. Homesteaded. Got settled an' then writ a letter back home t'Chicagy fer Ma to come on out. But she wouldn't. She liked the comforts an' water closets there. He writ her again.

Told her the country was sweet. Said it was just like the lily of the valley, full a glory. Well, the Lily of the Valley is fadin', let me tell you."

"So. You too," Pier whispered.

Red Joe shrugged and laughed low. "What's the difference, Pier? C'mon, let's have a holiday while we can. It ain't every year our wives'll let us raise Cain at the county fair. C'mon."

Sighing once more, Pier agreed.

They stepped along on the soggy straw in the alley. They stepped out of the front door and broke into dusty, lip-drying September sunlight. They moved through whirling eddies of people: pairs of old ladies mournfully looking for something lost, threes and fours of scrubbed girls fun hunting, youths with trouble glinting in their eyes, groups of heavy overalled men pawing the air with talk of crops and hunting. Most were smiling. An old grandmother, sour with wisdom, cracked a smile when Red Joe winked at her. Talk was excited, chittering. It was the windup day of the fair.

Red Joe led the way to an open canteen. They had a hot dog, mustard, a bottle of beer.

Licking his lips, Pier followed Red Joe toward a booth where a sly-eyed slicker ran a faro game. Both he and Red Joe put down some money, lost, strolled on.

People tugged, shoved. Once Pier's elbows pushed into the soft breasts of a young woman; another time into the soggy lumps of an old crone. Friends banged him on the back, asked how the wife was, remarked on the dry weather, groaned when prices were mentioned.

A crowd collected around a barker off to one side. Red Joe dragged Pier toward it.

The barker's voice came up. His face streamed sweat, a frothy spume lay thick on his purple lips. His life-soured eyes rolled. He was dressed in a flashing blue. He held up a show card studded with glinting watches. "Ladies an' gents. Here it is, here it is. A real bargain. Never been one offered like this before. Got to have time on the farm. Got to milk the cow reg'lar, got to kiss yer ol' lady reg'lar, yessir, everything's got to be reg'lar on the farm. So I don't need to tell you how important time is. So. Here we have a genuwine gold-filled gold-solid watch, works guaranteed, in first-class workin' order. Just wind 'er up in the mornin', the same way you wind up yer wife, an' ye're set for twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours you don't have to worry."

Grunted rumblings of laughter drowned out the barker's talk momentarily. A heavy belly jiggled against Pier's backsides.

"Just look at it. Shines, don't it? Good gold in it. A genuwine gold-filled gold-solid watch, works guaranteed." He paused. "You know, folks, gold is a wonderful thing. When you kin say yer wife's worth her weight in gold, you got a wife. Yes, you have. Gold. Ye're lucky. Luckier than me, let me tell you. I had the hard luck to marry a piece a shined-up brass."

Guttural mirth stirred the milling farm folk again. Mouths gaped. Flies buzzed around slopping ice-cream cones. Eyes rolled. Long pink tongues lapped at all-day suckers. Fathers, sons, daughters, wives shifted from one foot to the other. Some mouths chewed, some were still. Red Joe watched with covert eyes.

"All right. Now. How much do you think a watch like this is worth? Huh? Huh? Make a guess. You there." The barker pointed at a fat, straw-hatted farmer.

Red Joe chewed, said, "Ten cents."

The barker paused. Laughter welled up around. His cautious eyes searched, found Red Joe. He studied the short man a moment, then grinned and winked. "Smart guy, huh? You want me to give 'em away, huh? You want me to burn up my gas fer nothin' comin' out here, don't you?"

"Didn't ast y'u to come, did we?"

The blue-and-pink crowd laughed.

"Huh." The barker paused, became solemn. "Just the same, smart guy, you an' I'll get along all right. Because these watches are actually goin' dirt cheap. Due to a special situation, we're sellin' 'em . . ." The barker lowered his voice to a confidential level. "You see, there was a fire in a jewelry store down in Sioux City yesterday. Maybe some a you read about it in the paper, huh?"

A few heads nodded solemnly.

"Sure. Well, this jewelry store was owned by a jeweler friend a mine. An' he says, he says to me this mornin', tears runnin' in his eyes, 'Bill,' he says, 'Bill, I need some money quick. Take a handful a these watches an' see what y'u kin do with them. Get rid of 'em any way atall. Just so I get the money an' kin start up my business quick again.' Well, folks, I had a lot a other things to do, but, yet, I felt it my duty to help him. So here I am. An' here's the watches." The barker held up a gleaming timepiece. He passed it around.

It came to Pier and he listened for its tick, looked at it, felt it with a stroking thumb, passed it on to Red Joe. "Looks all right."

Red Joe scowled at it.

"I could use a watch," Pier said. "Mine ain't much 'count no more."

Red Joe grunted. "It don't say the make."

The barker took it from Red Joe, held up the show card again. Each timepiece glistened in the sun. "You see, folks. Here's a couple fellers right here who like it. A good watch. Well, due to the fact that I'm kind of in the hurry to get back to my friend with his money, I'm sellin' these watches fer a buck apiece. Dirt cheap. One buck. One shinin' greenback. One green cabbage leaf. One berry. One do-re-mi. Here's a man takin' one. Good. Here you are. Yes, folks, one piece of a mazuma. One bright shekel. Thank you. I'm sure you'll like it. A one spot. Here y'u are. Sure. Works guaranteed. Just one simoleon. Just one green jacket. One green boy. Here you are. Yessir. One frogskin. Ah. Yessir. Here you are. Thank you. Thank you. Leave a little room for the other guy. Not all at once now. Yessir. One toadskin. C'mon, boys, make it snappy. They're goin' fast. Step right up an' pass yer frogskins right up to Pops. Ha. There you are."

"I'll take one," Pier said at last.

"Okay. Here you are, mister. Your friend want one too?"

Red Joe shook his head.

Pier dug painstakingly into his worn pocketbook, carefully separated a dollar bill from a small fold of them. "Here."

"Ah. Good. An' I'll throw in a chain fer good measure. Just stick that watch in yer pocket, an' it'll go right to work for you. It's already wound. Yessir."

Pier grunted, fumbled with it, liked its gleam, set it on time, hooked the chain in the watch hole of his overall, put it away in the bib pocket.

They stepped away. The voice of the barker faded.

"Now what?" Pier asked.

Red Joe surveyed the fair grounds. "Look. There's a crowd over there." Red Joe pointed. "Let's go see what's up."

Pier scratched his chin. "You know, it just come to me they should be about pickin' the winner now."

"Aw, c'mon. They won't pick the winner till four."

"Wal . . ."

Red Joe led the way. Another barker, dressed like the first, was ranting at an openmouthed crowd. He stood on a barrel. The barker had quick gestures, sly dark eyes. Continually he hitched up his well-pressed trousers with a deft brushing lift of his elbows.

His voice came up, haranguing. "Right this way, folks. Right this way. See the biggest hoax this side a paradise. Ain't been nothin' like it since the Garden a Eden."

There was a protesting murmur near by.

The brown eyes of the barker spotted the murmurer. He smiled easily, his oiled, black hair glinting in the sun. "My mistake, folks. There's a reverend in the crowd an' he objects."

Pier craned his neck. He saw Domeny Beckstrom standing near, older, fatter. "Jumpin' Joseph, it's Old White Wings Himself."

"Huh," said Red Joe.

The barker purred. "The reverend objects. An' that's okay. We need reverends to keep us on the straight an' narrer. Keep us from havin' too much fun, be the governor on the flywheel."

The jostlers tittered.

"Folks, I don't think the reverend would want to rob us of a little clean fun, though. So'll get back to my story. Well, folks, this thing I was tellin' you about, it's the biggest hoax this side of hell." The barker paused dramatically. "That all right, Reverend?"

Domeny Beckstrom, wearing black and white, shook his head slowly. His pink jowls waddled.

The barker grinned, rolled on. "Folks, this is the biggest hoax this side the Styx." He winked slyly. "Biggest. Just look at them people comin' out the other end there." He pointed to a stream of farmers emerging from a flap at the far end of the tent. Most were doubled up in fits of cachinnation. A few were sullen, resentful. "Ask one of them dopes an' see if he'll tell you what he saw. It's so good he won't say a word about it."

Pier nudged a grinning, bearded man next to him. "You been in?"

"Yeh."

"Good?"

"See fer yerself. Yer dime is as good as mine. I'm just standing here to make sure everybody else makes a fool a hisself too."

Red Joe grabbed Pier by the arm. "Let's take a look."

"Okay. If you say so." Pier dropped ten cents into a cup held by a

flashily dressed woman, passed into the dark interior of the tent. For a second he was blinded by the sudden change from light to dark. Then his pupils narrowed, pierced the dusky dim air. He saw nothing but an empty expanse with a spread of canvas over it. Tufts of dried grass and patches of sand reached to the walls.

Someone directly behind Pier began to laugh hysterically. Then Red Joe raised a knee, slapped it, laughing. Red Joe whacked Pier's shoulder. "Catch?"

Pier stared at the barren floor.

"Don't you see? There's nothin' in here. It is the biggest hoax in the world. See? We paid ten cents to see nothin'. Catch?"

Pier saw all the others laugh around him, saw Red Joe's eyes wrinkle in derision, fitted a smile on his own lips. Following Red Joe, he stepped through the flap into the bright sunlight. He blinked.

"Don't you catch yet?" Red Joe mocked.

"Sure."

"Don't you see, man? A crook was actually tellin' the truth fer once."

Pier said nothing.

Red Joe squared his bowed legs. "Pier, you are a dumb bastard, ain't you?"

"That's what you think."

The two stared at each other with strained expressions; then, exactly at the same time, slapped each other on the shoulder, laughed uproariously.

Pier was first to sober. "Say, I wonder, the judges must be done by now." He drew out his watch. He looked at it, thickened his brow, shook it.

"What's the matter?"

"Why, it still says three."

"Huh."

Pier put the watch to his ear. "Why, it ain't runnin'." He wound it a few strokes. On the third twist, the works snapped inside the case. The hands went wild. The big hand chased the little, not quite being able to catch it. Drawing a sudden breath, Pier held it to his ear again. It rattled like a pailful of tin cans. "A gyp!"

Pier snapped open the back, swore. Before him lay the works: two small brass wheels, a broken spring. "Judas t'Priest. Talk about hoaxes, this one takes the cake."

Red Joe looked, snickered. "I knew it. Buy from a Cheap Charlie an' you get Cheap Charlie stuff."

"It ain't a laughin' thing," Pier growled. "Wonder where that son of a bitch went. C'mon." He started through the crowd.

They hunted in vain. The spot where the crowd had once pushed against Pier and Red Joe was empty. Only scuffed-up sand remained. To one side, trampled in the sand, lay another watch just like Pier's.

"That devil," Pier murmured.

Red Joe slapped his shoulder. "Forget it. It was only a buck."

"Bucks don't come easy these days."

"Forget it. You had your fun."

"Huh."

"Besides, ain't you headin' fer the judges?"

"Oh. That's right."

Pier threw the watch away, quickened his step.

They met Otto Grimovich just as they entered the pavilion.

"Hallo, Pier. Sss-piteh. Congratulations. You won fust prize."

"I did?"

"Yep. Fust. That was a nice yearlin' you had there. Right fine."

"Wal I'll be damned. Maybe my luck's changed at last."

. 2 .

But things did not improve. During October, a thirsty wind came driving out of the southwest. It dried the corn to crisps.

When Pier and Teo wheeled the corn picker into the field, they found about a third of the ears on the ground. They pondered awhile, finally decided to take turns: one round, riding the machine; the next picking up the loose corn.

It was rough going both ways. A hay-filled sack spread over the steel spring seat didn't appreciably ease the bumps for the rider; and the walker had to gather up the stray ears on the run, nose to the ground and arms blindly throwing corn into the back of the moving machine.

It was three in the afternoon. The sky was low with a gray overcast. They were at the end facing the highway. One more day of picking and the harvest was in.

"Dad, ain't it about my turn now?" Teo grumbled, coming up

behind the picker with an armful of corn encased in dirty, harsh-edged leaves.

"Wal . . ." Pier turned in his seat, looked severely down at his tall, grown-up, awkward-kneed son. Pier's back ached, almost burned with pain. With an effort he managed to keep his voice level. "Don't tell me ye're already tired?"

Teo's eyes shifted. He mumbled, shifted a booted foot. The ground powdered up under his toe.

"Huh? What's that?"

Teo glanced up. His young peach face was black with ear smut. His cotton-blond hair was gray with dust. His eyes were green, his lips crimson. "Well, I ain't exactly fresh."

"Huh. What do you think I am, juicy?"

"No."

"Boy, my back is about broke in half."

Teo straightened and groaned. He pulled a weed out of a sprocket wheel. He crumpled it in his strong hand. "Well, all right. I kin go one more round."

"Good boy," Pier forced himself to say. "Good boy." He paused, rubbed his back slowly. "Say, I tell you what you can do. Run to the house a minute an' see if Ma's got some tea on the stove. An' catch up a couple a crackers. Will y'u, huh, gangleshanks?"

Teo brightened a little, loped off toward the yard.

Pier watched the boy's heavy-footed run. Teo had grown. Another inch and he would be the man of the family.

Pier sighed. It was too bad, but he and the boy were no longer friends. Like a stone between two trees, a difference had come between them.

Pier crawled off the picker and began to grease it with an alemite gun. He pulled weeds out of the bull wheel.

In a few moments Teo came back with a small pail of hot tea and dried-beef sandwiches.

They sat down on the ground to eat. A chill from the earth, creeping through his dusty overall, numbed Pier's skin.

"Sure wish that corn hadn' a fell," Teo grumbled through a bite of bread and beef.

"Yeh."

"I wouldn't mind stayin' home from high school if I was to run

the picker, but to run behind it like this . . . no, I think I'd rather keep up on my books."

"Huh." Pier gobbled into another huge bite, pushed it into his cheek, cleared his tongue for talk. "Wal, son, it just can't be helped. You know that."

"Quittin' school right in the middle a my studies . . . you can't keep anything in your head that way."

"Don't yell at me. I didn't knock them corn ears off. If I had my say a things, I'd have us sittin' by the stove right now, with our feet up on the railin' an' our shoes roastin' in the oven, let me tell you."

"All the guys at Rock Falls will be ahead of me. Before long I'll be the dummy in the class."

"Land alive, boy. What do you want me to do, hire the Âlde Han? What do you think I raised you fer, show?"

"Awww . . ."

"Look, you tack-headed lightning brain, if you can't catch up a month out a school, you ain't a true Frixen."

Teo rambled on. "Course, if I was to run the picker, that'd make up for it some. Or if we was to have a milking machine. But . . ."

"Milkin' machine, milkin' machine, that's all I been hearin'. Boy, what do you think I am, Croesus? Money don't grow on bushes, you know," Pier exclaimed, exasperated. "Boy, how d'y'u expect me to buy a milker when the corn is down to ten cents a bushel, an' the bottom not yet in sight?"

Teo looked down. He wiped his mouth with a swiping motion of his jacketed arm. Dust from his cheek streaked his red lips and he spat.

"You sure are an ol' grumblebox, boy," Pier said. With another part of his mind he observed that the boy's long fingers, like his, were coarse with sores and calluses.

Teo rinsed his mouth with tea, stood up. "Well, do I ride this round?"

Pier rinsed his mouth too, got up and set the tea pail against a fence post. "It's still one more round for me." He stepped toward the waiting picker. He slapped his hand on the open, steel-toothed mouth. "Hearin' you yank, a man'd almost think I was cheatin' you."

Teo said nothing.

Pier walked around behind the horses. The four gray fillies in the

rear hitch were all out of Maid and Mell, one set, Betts and Belle, born in '30, the other, Young Maid and Young Mell, in '31. Pier was proud of them and he was pleased to see they were fresh. It was another evidence that the breeding had been good. He now had high hopes that a pair of black geldings born that spring would turn out well too.

He stepped forward to examine the lead team, the gray brood mares themselves. Maid and Mell stood puffing, head down, and they were at last beginning to show their age. "Really should have seven on a picker," Pier muttered. "Next year, we're restin' the horses longer at noon. A beast should have his rest in the middle of the day as well as a man." He lifted Mell's collar from her shoulder, rubbed a lump under her hide. It had been swelling a little each day. He patted her, growled affectionately, "Good girl, good girl."

He stepped around to the other side of the picker where the old blacks, Colonel and Topsy, hitched with a long line to the lead team, were drawing the triple-box wagon of corn along.

Pier hopped up on the side of the wagon, looked in. A small mound of half-husked golden corn lay on the bottom. He shelled an ear in his hand. "Danged corn is too dry almost. Don't husk well this way. Boy, in the old days, if I was to turn up on the yard with a load as dirty as this, I'd a got fired before supper." He mumbled to himself. "Danged machine. Ain't got brains like a human bein' to clean off them husks." He peeled a few ears. A rising wind snatched the loose husks and whipped them toward the resting fillies. One of them pricked up an ear, back and forth, then relaxed.

"Wal, might as well get goin'," Pier growled. He jumped down to the ground, stepped around behind the picker. Teo was still standing on one foot, sullenly glowering at the earth. Pier took in a deep breath. "Boy, ain't you got a spark a git in y'u? Now why wasn't you lookin' around for any ears you might a left on the ground?"

Teo shrugged.

Pier glared a moment at the lanky boy, then, foot cumbered with boot, clambered aboard the steel prairie ship. He took up the lines. "All right. Giddap. Git. Gluckt, glickt."

But the horses did not move.

"Hey there. Git. Giddap. Git. Glickt."

Still the horses did not move.

"Wal, hocus-pocus Pilatus. Teo, step up there an' throw a clod at

them sugar susies. Ye're always bragging about how good a baseball pitcher you are. Let's see you put one in there."

Teo picked up a huge clod, broke off a small piece, threw from where he stood. It almost hit Pier as it skimmed by. It missed the horses.

"Huh. Some pitcher. You throw like an old woman."

Angry, Teo stepped around the machine, walked up close behind the horses, stood off to one side of the picker's grinning steel teeth, heaved the rest of the clod with terrific power. It hit Colonel on the back.

The fillies jumped. The old blacks woke up. The lead team, Maid and Mell, stirred. The giant eveners cracked, groaned. The huge machine, heavy on one side, lurched to the left. The mouth opened around Teo's legs, teeth chewing.

Teo, still recovering his balance from the throw, couldn't quite leap away in time. The great mouth with its powerful grinding molars crunched into Teo's legs. Teo screamed once, toppled, fell over the metal nose.

Just as the mouth touched the boy, Pier saw it, yelled a powerful "Whoa." With a muscle-jumping pull, he hauled back on the lines.

The grays reared up on hind legs, the young horses stopped. The blacks, on the outside pulling the wagon, being drawn to the right by the lead line, crashed into the rumps of the fillies. There was a crumpling, jangling noise, then, a quivering silence.

Pier heaved himself over the top of the machine. He clutched the falling boy in his arms. "Teo, boy. Teo!"

Teo's eyes rolled behind narrowing, paling eyelids. Beneath the black dust his face turned chalk-white.

"Teo, boy. Teo!" Pier dared a look at the legs. He pulled at them, agonized. With a tearing sound one came free. Blood spilled through the torn overall.

Teo slumped forward. Because of his position, the lad's free leg couldn't quite reach the ground.

Pier shook him. "Teo. Boy."

Slowly Teo revived. His eyes were two green stones turning in wild white milk.

The other leg, Pier saw, was caught, was terribly mashed. The tips of the steel molars had sunk out of sight into the boy's flesh.

The horses stirred.

Teo gasped. "Dad! Throw the picker out a gear. We got young horses here."

"Oh. That's right." Pier's mind was a blur. He flicked around the machine, jerked at the lever, once, twice, turned it over.

"Unhitch 'em." The boy's voice faltered.

"Oh, that's right." Pier fumbled the traces loose, trotted the horses to the fence, hitched them to a pole.

Teo moaned. Still leaning over the steel nose of the picker, the boy clenched his teeth to keep from fainting. His body began to turn slowly on the weak leg.

Pier threw an arm around the young, powerful shoulders, held the lad close. "Boy, we——"

"Get the big crescent wrench. Quick. An' the fitright too," Teo gasped.

"But you can't stand this way, boy."

"Get them wrenches. I'll hold on." Teo pointed. "Loosen that nut there. Then that one."

"Take it easy, boy. I only got one pair of hands." Pier cursed his thumb-clumsy fingers. He nicked flesh off a knuckle. He jerked, spun the nut loose, dropped it in his pocket. He crawled under the nose.

"Now those two there."

"Not so fast, not so fast," Pier grunted, hurrying, jerking, worming his way under the machine. Tears blotted his sight. Through the open sides of the picker's mouth he saw the mashed flesh of Teo's calf muscle. A strip the length of a small steak lay over a gouging tooth. Dirt-thickened blood dripped slowly from a strap iron near Pier's face. Pier closed his eyes, fought back a faint. He snapped his eyelids, wrestled with the nut. He pushed farther under the machine, frantically worked the wrenches. He banged his fingers, his wrist. An elbow bone cracked against bitter-hard steel, thrilled. Bleeding sores began to spot his knuckles.

"Hurry, Dad."

"Son, I am."

"I can't hold on any longer, Dad."

"Boy, boy. Hold on just another minute."

Pier heard a movement above. He tore at the works.

A noise, a clumping, sounded on the metal above him. There was a sickening crack of bone.

Pier dug himself from under the machine, lifted the boy. The lad's turning had snapped his knee out of joint. Pier laid him out straight on the picker's nose, ran behind the machine, grabbed the water jug dangling from a leather cord underneath the seat. He ran back, doused the boy's stilled face with the frost-chilled drinking water.

Teo's eyes slowly opened. His dust- and water-spottled face took on color again. He looked at Pier, looked at the steel nose. "One more bolt, Dad. That one."

Pier's clabbering fingers dug at it. Stiff with paint and rust, the nut would not come off. With a bulging of shoulder muscle, Pier jerked so hard he snapped the bolt off. Reluctantly the huge machine parted its jaws. Trembling, out of breath, Pier gently drew the lad's leg out. Carefully, straining, he shrugged the lad up on his shoulder, carried him to the house.

Then he called Dr. Helder.

· 3 ·

Pier shifted on the seat of the truck and filled his pipe.

Red Joe asked, as he drove along, "How's the kid today?"

"Tolerable. Doc says he'll be up an' around an' in school in a week. Sittin' by the stove now. Helped me chorin' last night."

"Was the leg ground up bad?"

"Down to where the honeycomb of the bone shone through."

Red Joe rolled down the window on his side, spat, blinked when the driving wind blew the spittle back into his face, cursed, and then exclaimed, "Jimpity! The boy's really tough."

"Kids that age are."

"I'll say. Now take my Jimmy. Why, I saw him break his finger one day, an' go right on pickin' corn. An' you know how much a little dinky scratch kin hurt yer hand in corn-pickin' time."

Pier nodded. He crossed his overalled legs, tied up his coat. The wind coming up from the southwest was bitter-sharp. It drove through the radiator and into the cab before the motor could warm it up. "Quite a wind pushin' up," Pier remarked, scowling at the black predawn sky.

"Yeh."

"The dust in the headlights there, it sort a looks like dark red smoke."

"Yeh."

"The old mother's sure blowin' up."

The truck swayed. There was a thumping sound in the rack behind.

Pier glanced through the back window. "Them pigs don't like the ride." he said, grinning, "Rootin' around there like they was playin' at breedin'."

Red Joe cracked a smile, chuckled. He weaved the steering wheel back and forth.

A highway sign, JUNCTION–75, came up. Red Joe looked from right to left, shifted gears, turned south on it. The road was graveled. Red Joe turned up the wick of the engine. The truck rattled on washboard gravel in a valley.

Red Joe muttered, "Figurin' the gas an' the time, I been wonderin' if you're so smart after all to try Sioux City." He chewed. "Sioux Falls is my favorite."

"Wal, it's my pigs."

"I know." Red Joe veered the truck to the left, missed a hole in the highway. "But I been hearin' funny things about goings on around Sioux City. Farmers are settin' up a picket line. Strikin'."

"Oh?"

"Ain't you read about it in the paper?"

Pier coughed. "I never read the papers. They're full a lies anyway."

"Yeh. Well, it says in the paper that the Holiday boys are puttin' a ring a steel around Sioux City. To keep out the milk an' produce."

"That mean hogs too?"

"Could be."

"Hey, maybe we'll have trouble then yit today."

"Trouble? We're liable to have our heads busted in."

Pier pursed his lips. His mouth had filled with tobacco juice. He looked for a place to spit, finally aimed a sluice at a crack opening up around the gearshift. His lips spurted an eel-long stream. A puddle of juice swelled around the base of the handle. Presently the cold wind seeping into the cab of the truck froze it hard and brown. "Huh. I'd like to see somebody try to bust mine in. There ain't a man in Siouxland big enough to do it."

Red Joe laughed. "I know I wouldn't like to try it, you big moose."

They drove along. A rising slope lifted the highway toward a

blurred horizon. The motor labored beneath the floor boards. Its vibrations stung the toes inside Pier's shoes.

They reached the crest of the hill. The motor eased, murmured. The truck dipped down. The sound of the running motor vanished. Red Joe shut off the switch. The truck gained speed. The wind rose. Loud shrilling sighs filled the cab. The wind fissured through the slits in the windshield.

A mile farther and they approached bridges spanning the Big Rock River. The stream wriggled twice through the road. To one side a farm lay locked in an arm of the river. Red Joe turned on the ignition again, hooked the motor in gear.

Pier broke the long silence with a sigh. "What a life. There's so little happiness in the world a man might just as well make up his mind to be happy without it."

"What's eatin' you now, Moose?"

"Oh, hogs are so low a man's gotta sell 'em before they're growed. An' the corn . . . Red Joe, did you ever in yer life hear a five-cent corn?"

"No, I ain't."

"A man might just as well burn it fer fuel."

Red Joe nodded, chewed.

"What a hell of a life. Everything's goin' to shucks."

"Aw, Pier, quit lookin' at the down side. Look at the bright side."

"Huh. You've said that before. Must be easy to say."

"Easy?" Red Joe turned on him furiously. "Easy? An' me about to lose my Lily of the Valley?"

Pier shifted in his seat. With his tongue he pushed his mashed-up quid of tobacco into his hand, rolled down the window, threw it to the wind. Then he bit off a fresh chew. "Wal, ye're right. It's hard to remember other people's troubles."

"I wouldn't be truckin' for money if I wasn't so close to the end."

"Uh-huh."

Red Joe's eyes became curt with inward thought. He leaned forward over the steering wheel. His short, humped legs stretched for the pedals.

The truck began to climb another slow rise. The black tower of Heaven, Iowa, rose out of the horizon to the west.

Red Joe looked at his watch. "Cripes, it's near seven an' it still ain't begun to light."

"It's the dusty wind. Probably be gritty an' dark all day. Boy! The old lady's sure raisin' a fuss."

"Yeh, it's cluttin' up all right." Red Joe worked the hand wiper a few times, cursed. "Can't keep the danged windshield clear."

Pier chuckled. "Huh. That's why I wouldn't take a Ford if y'u was to give it t'me."

"Well . . . I wouldn't say that. After all, a Ford is a cheap-runnin' car. If it breaks down all you need is a piece a bailin' wire to fix it up again."

"Don't need to buy no repairs, huh?"

"No. An' if you do, it never costs more than a dime or so."

"That's just it. Fords'll dime you t'death."

Red Joe said nothing.

"Yessir. A Ford's just not a growed-up car."

Red Joe shrugged.

It began to dawn, became light. Red Joe snapped off the headlights.

The truck dipped into the valley of the Little Rock River. Willows fronted a low cliff of red sand.

The truck crossed a flat bridge, began to climb another rising roll of the prairie country. It reached the edge of a low plateau, crossed. Far to the southwest, in a valley where the two Rock rivers joined, in the red-murky haze, rose the black water tower of Amen. To the east, on a table-smooth plain, like sharp pointed icicles, pricked the steeples of Hello.

They came to Chokecherry Corner, where Highway 18 crossed 75. A cluster of filling stations, red-and-yellow, green, orange, with hamburger stands attached, nestled beneath a dozen towering cottonwoods. Red Joe drove into the station farthest on the right. A tall gaunt man with gray hair and sad eyes stirred himself up to offer a greeting. The gray man gassed the truck, served them each a hamburger. In the back shanty, a stubby, silver-gray woman worked over a stove. From somewhere came the noise of rowdy children.

While Pier and Red Joe sat eating, a friend of the tall gray proprietor came in. The gray man put out his hand to shake. A dozing dog jumped up, growled. The old man laughed. "Brownie hates it when somebody touches me. He's my friend."

Just as they were leaving, a giant of a young man, shambling, with dreamy eyes, and carrying a book, stepped out of a cabin to the right.

Pier saw instantly the giant was the son of the tall gray man. Looking at the lanky's ragged clothes, his hangdog look, Pier said, nudging Red Joe, "See that big lug? Kin you imagine layin' around like that, an' him so big an' strong? Must be sick, or he'd show more git an' go than that."

"Maybe there ain't no jobs, Pier."

"Huh. There's always work fer a willin' man."

Red Joe started up. Three blasting shifts of gear and the truck settled into a steady run. It traveled over an unrippled expanse of prairie.

Red Joe growled, "God, now it's gettin' dark again. Must be a hell of a duster blowin' up. Man's gotta keep his lights on or he'll hit somebody." Red Joe leaned forward, snapped on the headlights again.

"Yeh. She's sure fussin'."

"Good thing we got all that weight back there, or we'd blow off the road."

"Yeh, an' I suppose on the way back home, the danged wind'll blow us all the way to Canady."

The motor struggled. It boiled. It fought the wind. It swerved from side to side. Sometimes oncoming cars were almost on top of them before Red Joe spotted the dull, owling, red headlights.

They entered Sioux Center. Main Street was black with cars and milling blue-clad farmers.

"By God," Red Joe exclaimed, "we've run smack dab inta the middle of a revolution. Look at them shotguns!"

A knot of farmers in the middle of the street waved them down.

Red Joe pulled up to one side. As he rolled down his window, he growled, "Them long-legged Sioux County Dutchmen must a gone nuts. Look at 'em there." Red Joe craned out his head. "What the hell's happened to you dikejumpers?"

A blond-red face pushed Red Joe back into the cab. "You guys got cream back there?"

"No."

"Sure?"

Red Joe said. "Did you ever hear cream grunt?"

"What?"

"Did you ever see cream with a curlicue tail? Take a good look back there."

The blond-red looked, grinned. "Okay. You can go on. But I'm warnin' you. You won't get to Sioux City with them."

Pier bristled, leaned across Red Joe's arm. "Who'll stop us?"

"Real, genuwine red-blooded Americans!"

"You mean reds, don't you?"

Red Joe cautioned, "Hey, take it easy, Pier. These guys are religious."

The blond-red bore into the truck again. The muscles of his neck shone up white through his skin. "What was that last crack, mister?"

"I said, what's rootin' you guys up so? What's louse here?"

"Are you sure you ast that, mister?"

"Sure."

"Oh. Well. Well, our dunderhead sheriff set up a machine gun in front of our co-op creamery here. Our creamery. An' he won't let us shut it up till we get our price."

Pier started. "Machine guns?"

"Yeh. But we kin handle him." The blond-red drew a sawed-off shotgun from under his jacket. "We're gonna blow his guts in, the bastard."

Red Joe grinned, said, "Sounds funny to hear you dike-jumpin' Dutchmen swearin'. I thought you was all religious."

"Mister, when the cows are bellerin' in the fields and the kids're yammerin' in the house, religion ain't got nothing to do with it, let me tell you."

Red Joe nodded.

Pier nodded too. "There's something in that all right."

"Better get on," the blond-red said.

Red Joe started up. He drove carefully through the tumbling streets.

Once they reached the country again, Red Joe pushed down the accelerator. The engine worked against the powering wind. Trees along the side of the road bent over like old women suddenly naked, dresses up and limbs bared. Billboards and signs lay scattered and smashed on the highway. A small privy lay against a fence. Tumbleweeds raced over the fields.

They drove through the flat lands of Million Dollar Corner. The land began to lift.

At Le Mars the brown wind became a flattening gale. Streams of ruddy dust, coming up from the vast plains of the far southwest,

from Oklahoma, Texas, Mexico, swooped past the truck in long spumes of red smoke. Plate-glass windows lay like shattered ice on the streets.

A mile south of Le Mars they rammed head on into a haystack. The wind had pitched it onto the highway.

Pier cursed.

Red Joe hunched over his wheel.

The pigs in back piled up against the cab, squealed loudly.

"Lucky thing I was just crawlin' along," Red Joe said, shaking.

"You kin say that again."

Red Joe backed up, drove around the obstruction.

They were approaching the outskirts of Sioux City when Pier saw a long row of red pinpricking lights needling the dark eerie forenoon. The line lay across the road.

"Wal, there they are," Pier said, sitting up, narrowing his eyes.

"Shall I make a run fer it?" Red Joe asked nervously.

"Sure. Bust right through the bastards."

"I dunno. They're liable to have somethin' on the road. Tacks or nails, or so."

Pier rose up. "Give 'em hell, the bastards. This is a free country, ain't it? They ain't got the right to stop a man doin' his business, ha' they? Give 'em hell."

"Yeh, that's easy fer you to say. You don't own this truck."

"Aw, t'hell with 'em. The bastards."

Just then the vague headlights of the truck caught up a mob of farmers. Shotguns, forks, barrel staves bristled on both sides of the road and in the nearby fields.

A shout went up, a roar of voices. The truck swam in a sea of faces. Red Joe slammed on the brake. The motor died.

A great roar of talk overwhelmed them. Sudden flickering lanterns jerked around the cab like giant fireflies. In the ruddy blowing dust the men looked like a hell full of devils.

The door jerked open on Pier's side. Rough hands tore at him.

"Hey, get them mitts off me, mister," Pier growled. The power in his voice stilled the gripping hands a little. "Gonna hang me first an' then beg my pardon?"

A face purpled by wind and sun and anger stuck out of the whirlpool of raging farmers. "That ain't a jokin' matter, mister. We just got through hangin' a judge this morning."

"A judge?"

"Yeh. Right back there in Le Mars. Where you just went through."

Pier swallowed.

"An' that ain't all. We burnt down two bridges, shot up a train, tipped trucks, an'——"

"A real judge? The law?"

"Yeh, an' we'll hang more if we hafta," a coarse voice sounded.

"Goddamn right we will. We'll hang the President himself, if we have to. We're out to get our rights."

A calmer voice said, "Well, now, boys, take it easy. We're only aimin' to get a little jistice. A chance to save our lives. We ain't aimin' to be rough."

The purple-faced man said, "The hell we ain't. We'll cut out a trucker's gizzard if he's truckin' produce. What you guys got?"

Pier shrugged, jerked his hands free. He nodded at the circle of men who were climbing up the side of the truck. "Wal, in a minute, from the looks a things, we won't have nothin'."

The coarse-voiced man said, "Better button that smart lip a yers, mister."

"Pigs," Pier said abruptly, when Red Joe didn't talk up. He began to wonder if Red Joe had turned yellow.

"Pigs, huh," the calm-voiced man said. "Where you from?"

"From Starum way."

"Oh. Outlaw country."

Pier said nothing.

"Look, don't you read the papers? Ain't you heard about Milo Reno? How he told us to lock up the city gates? Put siege to her?"

"No."

"Ain't you heard him oratin' about how we should 'Raise less corn an' more hell'?"

"This is pigs."

"What's pigs but corn walkin'?"

Pier pointed to the farmers who had crawled in among the squealing pigs. "Them thieves friends a yers?"

"Still got a smart tongue, huh?"

Pier stilled. He looked at Red Joe, saw him staring wildly. Pier shifted in his seat, twice chewed his quid, then leaned out to spit.

The heel of a rough hand jammed against Pier's chin. Squirting tobacco spilled over his face and on his jacket. A drop hit his eye and he was momentarily blinded.

They grabbed him, first by the arms, then by the legs, and tore him loose from the truck.

Pier struggled. With mighty wrestling movements he jerked free. He stumbled into a ditch, fell on his hands and knees. He sloshed forward into the soggy bottom. A wetness splashed up into his face. A drop of it trickled into his mouth. It had a creamy taste. Staring at the half-frozen white-gray stream, he knew it to be milk. Getting to his feet, he saw bashed-in milk cans lying all along the fence. Actually. Ae. The ditches were flowing with milk. What was the world coming to now?

He turned and bucked into the mob. He knocked down a short man. He aimed a driving blow into the face of a fat one. He hit. A bone cracked. He felt the mushy nose of the fat one flatten beneath his knuckling fist.

He stood free. He puffed.

The others breathed harshly too.

"That'll learn y'u," the purple-faced man said.

A lantern flashed in his face again.

Pier growled, rubbing his aches, "Judas Priest. Y'u guys sure got a wild hair, ain't y'u? What's got into you Bolsheviks?"

"Mister," the coarse-voiced man snarled from behind a raised lantern, "mister, we're aimin' to get our jistice."

The calm-voiced man said, "We're hungry, an' we're gonna get the price we want fer our stuff. We're tired a takin' orders from the East. We're tired a havin' people tell us what they want for their stuff an' what we're to get for ourn. We're hungry, we are. Y'u should know better than to fight with your own brothers."

"Wal, I didn't start this, you know."

"Let's be reasonable," the calm-voiced man said, scratching his whiskers, "let's be smart-wise. We know it's the East what's agin us. Why, the country's lousy with insurance-company investigators, with Wall Street alligators. They're thicker'n crotch lice. An' in time they'll own us body an' soul if we don't fight back. An', mister, you know no man yit ever got what he wanted without a fight. You know no man yit was ever handed a gold castle on a silver platter without he had to work for it."

"That's true," Pier mumbled.

A scuffle sounded up near by. Pier looked up, saw Red Joe bent over a barrel. A skinny man with a jerking Adam's apple was flailing him with a whip.

Pier sprang forward, glad to see that Red Joe had at last protested. With a quick wrenching motion he jerked the whip free from the falling hand. He snapped it into the skinny man's face. A red welt instantly raised on it.

A gun flashed. A shot roared over Pier's head.

"You ain't learned yit, I see," the coarse-voiced man shouted, waving a sawed-off shotgun.

"Lay off Red Joe then, an' I'll lay off with the whip."

The calm-voiced man stepped up. "Let the trucker to his feet, you damned clay eaters. This was goin' to be a friendly revolution, remember?"

"To hell with that," the coarse-voiced man shouted. "I don't give a damn if we kill everybody." A wild fever shone in his eyes.

Pier said, trembling with frustrated rage, "You bastards, hittin' a man in his knockers when he's down. Do you call that bein' brotherly?"

The calm-voiced man said, "You're right. You're right. But the boys ha' been at this for a week now. Ain't had much sleep. An' the wind's raw and dirty. Men's nerves get on edge, mister. You understand." The calm-voiced man helped Red Joe to his feet.

Pier snapped, "Dirty bastards. I ought to give you all a forkbite in the backside. Bastards."

"Let me ask you something. Do you like five-cent corn? That you sweat all year to git?"

"Wal, hell no. Who does?"

"An' three-cent hogs?"

"Judas Priest, no."

Red Joe tugged at Pier's jacket. "Don't argue with them, Pier. C'mon." Red Joe's face was bruised, bleeding. His eyes were twisted with anger and fear.

The calm-voiced man said, "We ain't arguin', little man. We're just talkin' things over." He rubbed his week-old whiskers, rolled his tired, blood-veined eyes. "A course, if you two still think ye're gonna run us down, we'll have to tar an' feather you."

"Ain't nothin' gettin' through?" Pier asked.

"Nothin'. No milk, no pigs, no corn, nor nothin'."

The coarse-voiced man grinned evilly. "How kin it? See them nails there?" He pointed to long strips cut from a threshing belt. Through it were pricked long spikes to catch flying rubber tires. "An' that

ain't all. We got more tricks down the road a piece. No sir, there ain't a truck goin' through here, mister."

Pier clamped his teeth together. He pulled at Red Joe's arm, dragged him toward the truck. They entered and he closed the door of the cab to shut out the men and the wind.

Red Joe's finger trembled as he pulled out the choke and stepped on the starter. The motor rumbled. "Shall I try to ram them anyway?"

Pier coughed. He hid his eyes. "It's no use, Red Joe. We're tough, but not that tough. No. We'll do like you first said. Take 'em to Sioux Falls. I need that check bad."

"I guess maybe ye're right." Red Joe suddenly clenched his fist. "Them bastards. It makes my blood boil."

"Wal, mine ain't exzactly restin' either."

· 4 ·

When Red Joe stopped at the head of Pier's lane at two o'clock that afternoon to let him off, the day was as dark as night. The red-brown wind drove across the land in solid waves and walls of power.

The moment Pier unlatched the door of the cab, it whanged open. With the wind hard on it, the door froze against the engine. Pier could not move it. He had to get up on the running board, plant his feet against the hood of the engine, slowly tear it back. When it came, it slammed shut with a crash.

Pier stepped back, bucking over, waiting for the truck to start. The moment it did, a wall of wind brushed him down, slapping him hard on his belly, throwing him against the rear of the truck. The rear wheel just missed rolling over his hand. Prostrate on the road, Pier watched the truck gather speed, saw it leaning askew in the wind, saw it vanish into the unnatural dark.

Painfully he crawled over the frozen ground. He fought his way across the road, into the ditch of the lane. Once the wind rolled him over. Branches and twigs from apple trees swapt him across the rump and back.

A great tentacle-tangled cottonwood branch crab-walked out of the orchard, engulfed him in its reaches. Frightened, he fought it. He wrestled with the stiff limbs. The crab-heavy cottonwood caught in his clothes, tore up his jacket. It gouged a hole in his cheek. He

fought. He struggled. With a final mighty wrench he wrestled himself free.

He ran on hands and knees. The chilling wind dried the sweat inside his clothes, the blood on his cheek. He puffed. He hid his face in the opening of his jacket.

Thoughts wriggled in his mind like ants. He hoped the boy Teo had had enough sense to bind his and his mother's faces with water-soaked masks. He wondered if the boy had hobbled out to the barns and masked the cattle and horses and pigs.

Pier struggled. The old lady was sure raising hell. In all his days Pier had never seen the like. He could not understand her. The ground had been no more powdery than other years. Nor any drier.

He fell into the small gully west of the culvert. For a moment he was out of the reach of the wind. He hunched up in the narrow gorge, holding his jacket over his nose. His tongue felt cracked. The roof of his mouth was as dry as the aftertaste of snow. He tried to gather spittle in his throat but couldn't. He shook his head. What could have gotten into the old lady? Her windbelly bothering her?

The dust drifted heavily in the quiet haven of the gorge. A wavering bank of red dust built up over his foot. He jerked it free. A man could get himself buried here, especially if he were to fall asleep. Ae.

He got to his hands and feet again, frogged toward the house.

He trundled onto the porch. He saw a light in the kitchen. He banged against the door. He stood up, pushed his way in. The door gave way slowly. Grains of sand ground in the hinges. Something on the floor was holding it back. Pier looked. A five-inch bank of red dust had drifted in over the threshold. He shoved himself inside, closed the door. The roaring outdoors hardly faded. With bleary, vein-wriggling eyes he looked around. By the stove sat the boy Teo, a wetted mask over his nose and mouth. With his bad leg up on the stove railing, the boy was reading a book.

Pier tried to say something, heard his throat give out a growl instead.

The boy looked up, startled, his green eyes wide. He dropped his lumpy, bandaged leg to the floor.

Pier slumped down on the nearest chair.

Teo hobbled across the room. "I was afraid you'd never make it."

Pier pointed. "Get me a rag, boy. A wet one." He had to shout to make himself heard.

The boy hitched to the closet beneath the stovepipe, jerked out a clean washcloth. He ran to the sink, soaked it in a pail of rain water. He handed it to Pier.

Pier pushed his face into the cooling rag. Eagerly he sucked through it. He nodded his head.

"Did you mask the cattle?" he asked after a moment.

"What?"

Pier raised his voice, forcing it knife-thin through the mass of noise around. "Mask the cattle?"

"An hour ago."

"Good boy."

Teo shouted something.

Pier waved his hand. "Save yer talk, boy," he yelled.

The lamp almost went out. It became momentarily dark.

Then, through the wet cloth, Pier got a whiff of eau de cologne. He looked around. He wagged his head toward the bedroom. "Ma Lysbeth?"

Teo nodded.

Pier wiggled his brows in surprise. "How'd the old gooseberry get here?"

"Otto."

So the old windbelly was here again. The old lady. The last time she had come, a calamity had followed her in through the door too.

A sudden dislike for her smoked up within him. He got up, entered the living room. He could barely see the chairs and the table in the black-dark room. Below the window, where there was a little light, gray, he saw a drift of dust working out of a crack in the sill into the flowerbox.

He staggered into the bedroom. Here the eau de cologne was stronger. The air seemed drenched with it. He stepped toward the bureau. He stumbled over an object. He got up. It was human. He leaned over the bureau, struck a match, quickly lighted the night lamp, turned.

On the floor was Ma Lysbeth, on her knees, praying. Her golden casque gleamed in the vague orange light. On the bed, before her, lay a small silver box. Pier remembered that a red sponge soaked with eau de cologne was inside it.

On the other side of the bed, her face covered with a wet rag, lay Nertha, struggling for breath.

Pier cut through the murmured prayers of the old lady. "What's goin' on here?"

Nertha opened her eyes suddenly, peering over the rag. Her eyes widened.

She looked so surprised, Pier asked, "Didn't you expect to see me again?"

She lay staring.

Again Pier roared, "What's goin' on here?"

Ma Lysbeth stirred, looked up. She sniffed, sneezed. Her face wrinkled with irritation. She went back to her praying.

"Hey."

Ma Lysbeth looked up again. "Soan, ain't you got no respect for prayers?"

"Prayers? Better you'd spend yer time soakin' masks. At least until this black blizzard dies down."

Ma Lysbeth tolled her head. "Soan, don't you know the end of the world has come? Judgment Day? Soan, get down on yer knees an' pray God to save your soul."

"Oh, don't be nuts."

"Judgment Day."

Pier blinked. He looked at Nertha. "Don't tell me you've been taken in by that moonhead talk."

Ma Lysbeth moaned. She prayed. "O God, hâld Jins ear nei my, hear myn redenen. O God, straf my net yn Jins grime. O God, ûnrjocht klibbet oan myn hannen. O God, iepenje myn herte, sadat ik de deadsliep net sliep."

Pier fought to keep calm. "Ma, that's enough of that snetter. Get up."

Ma Lysbeth recoiled as if whipped. Majestically, slowly, she got to her feet. She set her aged, slat-long legs apart for balance. "Soan!" She held her windbelly close.

Pier glanced at her golden headdress, at her little silver box of eau de cologne. "Wal, Ma, I see you was ready to greet yer Lord an' Master with gold an' silver in hand."

"Soan, blaspheme not."

Pier curled his lips. The old woman, once the giver of milk from breast, was now like the waste of drought, juiceless and useless.

The thought seized his mind. His eyes opened. Behind her he saw

vast lonesome reaches, and dust, and chalk-white bones. The vision filled him with slow, chilling, spreading horror.

"Soan, I deman' respect."

Pier fought to keep himself intact. "Aw, shut up, you old rip, prayin' through yer old pickle whiskers, stirring up my wife with yer sorrerin' wails an' weeps."

"Soan."

He threw out his arm to keep her at a distance. "Get away."

"Soan, is that the way to show respect for your Âlde Mem?"

Just then a violent sneeze seized Nertha. It shook the bed she lay on. A slow smile twisted her child lips.

· 5 ·

By the evening of the next day, the wind settled, the sky cleared.

Dust drifts stretched everywhere. Half the gully in the apple orchard was filled in. Between the barn and the cornerib a ribbed, brown, snaillike drift curved to the northeast.

Dust had piled on the window sills of both house and barn, dust had crept into the cellar, dust had choked two small calves and twenty chickens, dust had clouded the sweet cistern water.

Rubbering on the country telephone wire, Pier heard that two old people at Starum were dying of dust pneumonia. Hundreds of children wrestled with colds.

It was an eerie world. Pier did not know what to make of it.

He spent part of the day clearing a path through the drift near the barn, the rest helping Nertha in the house: sweeping the floors and the sills, cleaning the curtains, shaking out the bedclothes, throwing out dirtied food.

Supper dishes were washed.

Pier sat with his feet up on the nickel railing of the stove, smoking a pipe. Teo was reading a farm magazine which Pier had bought specially for him. Nertha was darning. Ma Lysbeth sat reading the Frisian *It Boek fan de Psalmen.*

The telephone rang: two longs, two shorts.

"That's our ring, ain't it?" Pier asked, pausing over his pipe.

"I guess so," Nertha said, a wondering look opening her eyes.

"Teo, you're closest. Get up an' see who it is," Pier said.

Grumbling a little, laying aside his magazine, Teo assembled him-

self, lanky arms and legs, and hoisted himself up from his chair. With his stiff leg he gangled to the phone. It hung from the wall near the living-room door. Teo took down the receiver, leaned against the wall on one foot. His young, uncertain voice was coarse. "Hello. . . . Who? . . . Yeh. . . . What? . . . Just a minute. I'll let you talk to him yourself."

Pier's chair came down on all four legs. "Me?"

"Yeh. It's Red Joe."

"Huh. Wonder what's eatin' him?"

"I dunno."

Pier stepped to the phone. He put the receiver to his ear and, stooping, shouted as if he had to span the distance by sheer volume. "Hallo!"

Red Joe's voice came through scratchily. "Pier?"

"Yeh."

A series of clicks sounded. Pier grunted. Damn them neighbors. Always lifting their receivers to listen in. Pier shouted into the mouthpiece, "Hey, you rubberneckers, quit stretchin' the wire."

Somewhere a child was crying, its shrill rising and falling like a cricket's whir.

"Hey, get off the wire, you rubbernecker."

"What?" Red Joe called.

"I didn't mean you."

"Oh. Well, anyway, what I was going to tell you was that it's come. Like I told you."

"What's come?" Pier roared.

Teo said, "Talk softer, Dad. Then he'll hear you."

Pier took the receiver from his ear, looked at Teo. "Huh?"

Teo repeated, "Talk softer. It works better soft."

"Oh. Yeh. Huh. I always forget. Okay." Pier returned the receiver to his ear. "What?"

Red Joe's voice scratched in his ear again. "Just got the notice from Sheriff Rexwinkel today. Blacktail's bank's foreclosin' me. He's ordered the sheriff's sale for two weeks from today."

"Naw."

"Well, if you was to look at that sign tacked up on that telephone pole on the corner of your farm there, you'd see for yourself."

"Naw."

"It's the God's truth."

"But they can't do that. You're a good man. You'll pay someday."

Red Joe's voice barely pierced through the singing of the country wire. "But they're doin' it." Red Joe paused. "Well, maybe it's okay. I'm gettin' kind a tired a tryin' to make a livin' on Pa's old Lily of the Valley. Give some other guy a chancet."

Pier's gore rose. "Lissen, Red Joe, hang on. We'll figure something out. Don't know what, but something."

"Yeh. That's easy to say. For you, because you're still sittin' on Easy Street. But me, here . . . why, it's hell, let me tell you, what with the old girl goin' mad. She says she's got half a notion to kill herself an' all the kids. Says——"

There was the sound of a scuffle on the wire.

Pier shouted, "What? What?"

Red Joe grunted at the other end. "Nothin'."

"Lissen, Red Joe. Don't give up. You ain't licked yit."

"Aw, there ain't nothin' you kin do. I guess I'm just one a these fellers what gets twelve chances an' makes thirteen mistakes."

"Buck up, man, buck up. Don't talk that way."

"Huh."

There was a click, then the wire sang.

"Hallo? Hallo?" Pier waited a moment. He muttered, "Huh, guess he must a hung up." Pier hooked up the receiver, turned, scratched his silvering red hair. "Of all the dumb rotten luck."

"What's the matter?" Teo asked.

"Blacktail's foreclosin' Red Joe." Pier rubbed his bristling chin. "An' I suppose that means me next."

Nertha's brow became troubled. She was like a child trying to understand an adult world.

Ma Lysbeth said nothing.

During the next two weeks Pier was aflame.

He learned, and it confirmed a vague feeling that had been growing in him, that farmers as a group were rapidly becoming slaves. Scores and scores were declaring bankruptcy and becoming renters. It was cheaper to pay rent than to pay high, predepression rates on heavily mortgaged property. Only a few were left who could still claim clear title to their land and they had all they could do to meet the taxes. In most cases these few were the stolid farmers who had not, like Pier, mortgaged one farm to buy another. For hired hands

there was no work at all. No longer could a young man leave his father's home and make a little extra dough to get married.

From Teo, who was suddenly wide awake and bristling with statistics, Pier learned that a year earlier five thousand farmers in Nebraska had rioted at a foreclosure sale, that they had forced the sheriff to accept five and ten cents apiece for machines and cattle and horses and hogs, a flat sum of a hundred dollars for the land, that they had promptly handed all of it back to the original owner. From Teo he also heard that the governor of Iowa had had to declare martial law the past spring in Denison. Irate farmers had refused to pay more than a penny apiece for cows.

Pier instantly understood the stories. He remembered the power he had butted against the day he and Red Joe had tried to break through the Holiday blockade at Sioux City.

The more Pier pondered on this strange new way of life that was rushing at him, the more he was convinced that the Siouxland farmers should rebel too. Only a better grade of soil had enabled them to hold out a bit longer than the others. Yes, the penny sale was the only hope.

But it had to be planned, and the planning had to be done in secret. Only a few could know.

Pier talked to Otto, Ol' Spit Triggs, Herman Brackx. Each agreed that Blacktail was a devil, each agreed that Red Joe was a good farmer. But when Pier asked if they would help pull off the penny sale, each looked off to one side, scuffed the earth with a nervous toe, coughed, hawked up spittle, spat, said nothing. Eyes rolled up under eyelids. Red Joe himself was dubious.

The day of the foreclosure sale broke clear. Two inches of snow had fallen in the night. Sunlight glinted. Men's breath smoked up in short, white spumes.

Farmers and townsfolk arrived early. Their lips were pinched.

Ol' Spit Triggs, now aging rapidly into a stiff old man, drove onto the yard with grim mien. His pale thin lips slowly and methodically worked on a quid of tobacco.

The sunflower boys, Otto, Peter, George Grimovich, now middle-aged bachelors, were wordless too.

From Starum, Herman Brackx came with a carful of men, including ancient, barreling Âlde Folkwâlda.

Women came too. Nertha, smiling, nervous, abstracted, went into the house to help Edna make lunch. Slop-hole Gertie and Kaia arrived with doughnuts and coffeepots.

Children, however, were unconcerned. They played in the haymow, ran over the yard, spread out a huge clock-shaped fox-and-geese game on the snow of a nearby field.

Pier sat in the barn, looking out through a cobwebbed window, watching the yard. All morning long a red fire had seethed in him. His heart beat wildly. His fingers felt numb.

Presently, quite by habit, as if the barn were a meetinghouse, men began to drift in. They sat on milk stools, alley walls, mounds of straw. They murmured together. Red faces, boiling pipes, huge rough hands, bulking shoulders clad in blue, loomed up in the dusky interior.

Calves lowed through the rolling talk.

Red Joe stepped in. He smiled a little. "Say, Pier, you guys still up to something?"

"Why?"

"Weasel Willie Rexwinkel, Blacktail's detective, is here, snoopin', askin' questions. So watch your step."

Pier looked around. "Teo, Jimmy, kin you two keep yer mouth shut an' yer eyes open?"

"Sure," Teo said.

Jimmy growled. "Not around that bastard. I get so mad I wanna wring his neck." Jimmy stretched to his full callow height. "That bastard. Why don't he get married an' leave our girls alone?"

Red Joe laughed. "He who talks a lot must prove a lot."

Jimmy reddened, muttered, "Just wait."

Pier said, "Jim, kin you hold off a day or two with that murder?"

The men laughed, stirred, blinked.

"I guess so."

"Good. You two go out an' stick like burrs to Weasel Willie. Just keep him out a the barn for a while." When the boys left, Pier said, "No use stirring up a nestful a depities."

Dark heads nodded.

Pier cleared his throat. "Red Joe, it's yer stuff. Tell us what you want us to do. Give us some idees."

Red Joe shrugged. "Idees? Man, it's you that's got 'em."

Pier looked at the cement floor. With his finger he traced irregular

designs, meaningless hieroglyphics, in the dust. "Wal, not me. I got 'em from somewhere else. Down from Denison way. An' Nebrasky."

"Uh-huh."

"Red Joe, how about lettin' us pull one them penny sales here? Like I was tellin' you. It's your only chance."

"Aw, Pier, it won't do no good. They'd just declare it illegal. Like that judge down at Le Mars did."

Someone coughed in the crowd. It was neighbor Brandt. Brandt leaned forward, stretching his thin red neck, and said, "Well, we could always string him up. An' I mean hang him. Like the papers said they did do but didn't."

Red Joe shrugged. "An' land in jail? No, I like my farm but not that much."

Ol' Spit Triggs cleared his tongue of tobacco bits, said, "Red Joe, I thought you had guts."

Red Joe shrugged again. "Guts? There's all kinds a ways a havin' guts, you know. Me, I want a chance when I show mine."

Pier said, "Red Joe, there's one thing I'd like to know. Tell me, if you had yer say, would you like to spend the rest a yer days on your farm, the Lily of the Valley?"

"What's the use a talkin' about it?"

"That's all I want to know." Pier leaned forward on his milkstool. He opened a palm and beat out his arguments on it with a hammering finger. "Men. There's only one thing to do. An' it's got to be done fast. Before Sheriff Rexwinkel gets here. That's to talk to every farmer what comes on the yard. Explain the situation t'him. Tell him that nobody's to pay more than a penny for anything. A nickel or a dime at the most. An' pay up right on the spot. Make Blacktail, who'll be clerkin' the sale, take the money right then an' there. Make him give you a signed receipt. Then hand the receipts over to Red Joe." Pier looked around, studying the eyes. "Really. It's that easy."

Red Joe sat down on the alley railing suddenly. "But, Pier——"

Pier turned on him sharply. "Red Joe, for the last time, do we have yer say to go ahead?"

Red Joe looked at his feet.

"Do we?"

"Well, I don't want to be responsible for broken heads."

"Do we?"

Red Joe twisted around on his seat. With his boot he pushed a plop of cow dung into the gutter. He looked slowly at the black-bearded faces of the blue-clad farmers around.

Men waited. Pipes stiffened. Jaws stopped over quids. Nostrils widened.

Red Joe's eyes narrowed. He swallowed, coughed. He spat a well-chewed quid into the gutter. "Well, okay, providin' you guys really wanna. An' providin' you know I can't bail you out a jail."

Pier stood up. "Wal, boys, what do you say?"

No one moved.

"Otto? What do you think?"

"Sss-pitch." Otto ran his tongue inside his upper lip and spat once more. "Well, Pier, you really can't go by me. You know me an' the law ain't never been very sociable."

"What do you say?"

Otto rolled his ox eyes. "Well, I say, fight the guv'ment."

"And you, Pete?"

"Sss-peteh. You bet."

"And you, George?"

"Sss-puteh. The same."

Herman Brackx interposed, rolling his blue eyes and rubbing his florid cheeks. "Pier, you know what this means, don't you?"

"Sure I do."

Herman Brackx hiccuped. His fat belly bounced. "I've been livin' with Blacktail in Starum all my life an' I know him. He'll never forgive you for bustin' up his party."

"T'hell with him. I ain't afraid a that skinner."

"Even if he goes for your farm next?"

"Man, he'll go for it whether I fight now or not."

"Well, that's true."

Pier waved an arm. "How about it, you birds, are y'u game? We're all next on the list, you know."

The hoarse, bearish voices rose. "Yeh." "Right." "Ye're dead right, Pier."

Pier raised a hand for attention. "Look. Some of you fellers come with me. I need three or four to stop all the cars comin' on the yard to tell 'em about the penny sale. The rest a you kin dig up pitchforks, clubs, so on. But no guns."

Ol' Spit Triggs asked, "What about a crowbar?"

"That's all right. But no guns."

Ol' Spit Triggs nodded. He shivered. He itched. "By God, if I didn't have lice, I'd think I had 'em." He looked around for a laugh, found none, sobered, ambled off to find himself a weapon.

A blue stream of shoulder-heavy men poured over the yard.

Pier drew Herman Brackx to one side a moment. "Herman, do you know Central well enough to ask her if she'll put through a gen'ral ring on the phone an' tell everybody in the country about this sale? An' to come?"

Herman Brackx nodded. "Sure I know her. But don't tell Minnie about it."

Pier laughed.

Cars came chugging up the rise from Starum, from across the prairies east, from the south, from across the Big Sioux in South Dakota, from Minnesota.

As each turned into the lane, Pier and his gang stopped them. Men armed with forks and clubs were automatically waved in. Men empty-handed were stopped, were urged to join.

Some of the strangers put up an argument, asked questions.

Curtly, grimly, Pier explained further.

The strangers watched him narrowly, eyes hard, weathered brows glowering, wondering.

Pier waved his arms, pointed, harangued.

And, after a while, the strangers nodded, closed their fists, agreed, were waved in.

At eleven sharp, Pier saw a new car coming down the road. In the distance he spotted the sheriff's insignia on the side door. Sheriff Rexwinkel and Blacktail were on the way. Feeling sure that he had converted enough farmers to the cause, he led the gang back to the granary where most of the men had congregated.

The new car entered the yard. It stopped near the men. Barrel-heavy Sheriff Rexwinkel rolled out of the front door, carrying his auctioneer's cane. Behind him came Deputy Ain'it Shraeder, his yellow corduroy cap pulled low over darting black eyes. Blacktail stepped out on the other side. He flipped open a sales pad.

Seeing the gleaming fork tines and sullen chins, the three stopped, swallowed, looked around with the quick eyes of animals caught.

Pier moved to the front. He leaned lightly on his fork. His mind began to sing with tension.

Sheriff Rexwinkel opened the flap of his holster. Deputy Ain'it did likewise. Blacktail, unarmed, and dressed in a straight well pressed gray suit and a new brown sheepskin, lifted his mustache superiorly, grinned, showing chalk-white teeth. Blacktail suddenly seemed old to Pier.

Sheriff Rexwinkel came up. "What's goin' on, Red Joe, a fire sale on forks?"

Red Joe's eyes retreated beneath his forehead. His lips became cautious. "Is that what it looks like?"

Sheriff Rexwinkel waved his bald cane at the semicircle of crowding, glowering farmers. "Is this going to be a peaceful sale? Or must I call out some more of my deputies?"

Pier broke in. He nodded toward Blacktail. "Last time I saw him he was wearin' a gun."

Sheriff Rexwinkel snapped, "Puddicombe's clerking for his bank. He ain't a deputy today." Sheriff Rexwinkel stepped closer, until his face was on a level with Pier's chest, looking up. "By the way, Frixen, what's this of your affair?"

Pier retreated a step. "Red Joe's my neighbor. An' I'm here buyin'."

Black-faced men pressed close. Grumbles, knuckled fists rose. Fork tines speared the frosty air.

A voice growled, "Get goin', Rex. We ain't got all day time."

Deputy Ain'it drew his corduroy cap down even more. From under the shadow of its peak black eyes watched them. Deputy Ain'it's dark sideburns gleamed in the morning sun.

Sheriff Rexwinkel nodded. He spun around on stumpy legs. He nodded again as he surveyed the yard. "Well, Red Joe, at least your intentions were good. You got everything lined up right nice."

Red Joe looked at him with covert eyes.

"Was it Frixen who changed your mind?"

Red Joe bristled. "I ain't sayin'."

"Them pitchforks and clubs, you had nothing to do with them?"

"No."

"Did Frixen?"

"I ain't sayin'."

Blacktail closed up his sales pad. "Rex, I think we ought to wait for better weather. Pretty raw out for a sale today." He smirked.

Coughs, then murmurs, then bellows blew up from a thousand throats.

Pier started. It was the sound he had heard in the air the day he had fallen from the windmill.

Deputy Ain'it drew closer to Sheriff Rexwinkel.

Blacktail and Sheriff Rexwinkel looked at each other, nodded, started for the car.

Instantly men bulked in their way.

Sheriff Rexwinkel shifted his cane to his left hand, flashed his gun. Deputy Ain'it drew his too.

Again, his mind leaping to the challenge, Pier stepped forward. Through knitted teeth, he said, "Rex, I wouldn't do that if I was you. After all, we fellers voted you in, you know."

Blacktail sneered. "Voted him in? Man, how can you vote when you can't even read?"

Pier ground his teeth.

Sheriff Rexwinkel hesitated. His eyes searched the crowd. "Well, fellows, you're forcing my hand, you know. I've got to have order."

Pier said, "Remember, Rex, a thousand votes can beat you in the next election."

With his left hand Sheriff Rexwinkel waved his cane, whirling it like the spoke of a running wheel. "Well, boys, only thing I can do then is to ask the gov'nor to send out troops. I've got to have order at this sale."

"Go ahead. We'll lynch him too."

A voice roared. "Go ahead. We'll lynch everybody."

"Kill him!"

"The bastard!"

"Kill!"

"String up that bastard Blacktail. There's the root of your trouble."

Sheriff Rexwinkel waved his cane again. "Now, fellows, friends——"

"Rex, get on the stump an' start callin' the sale. Get goin'."

"What you waitin' fer, time or something?"

Masses of bristling tines pressed forward, one of them pricking the sheriff. Faces purpled. Bull voices blew and trumpeted.

Pier grated into Sheriff Rexwinkel's ear, "Rex, don't you really think you better hold the sale?"

"But, Pier, you know as well as I do that any foreclosure sale held under threat is no sale."

"What's a foreclosure but a threat to the rest of us?"

Sheriff Rexwinkel swallowed, looked at Blacktail meaningfully, put away his gun, waved his cane in a gesture of defeat. Deputy Ain'it slipped his gun away too.

Blacktail's smile vanished. Doubt circled his eyes.

A coarse voice scratched, "Get up on yer stump there, Sheriff."

A hoarse voice harshed, "Get goin' or there'll really be trouble."

Bellows mounted into roars. Power became thunderous.

Sheriff Rexwinkel clambered up on an empty steel barrel. Deputy Ain'it gave him a weak hand, helped him stand upright.

Sheriff Rexwinkel lifted his hands.

Slowly silence worked into the crowd. Waves of unrest and bitter comment moved away toward the horizon.

Cumulus clouds chased dark shadows through the blue-clothed crowd.

In the house beyond, women's faces pressed against windows, watching.

"Friends." Sheriff Rexwinkel paused, tried to laugh. "Well, from the looks a things, I guess I ain't got a friend in the crowd." Sheriff Rexwinkel's eyes hunted in the mass of men. A weak grin curled his fat red lips. "Men. Friends. Look, boys, you don't know what you're doin'. You can't force me to sell on your terms. You've got to abide by the law. The law. This is a free country. A free country and you've got to abide by the law."

Pier snapped, "T'hell with the law."

Sheriff Rexwinkel angered. "That's treason, an' you know it." He pointed his cane fiercely at Pier. "You can be jailed for that."

A silence, a silence as pervasive as the quiet of the skies above, spread around.

Sheriff Rexwinkel corrugated his brow. "Are you fellows actually going to force me to do this?"

"Get goin'!"

"Snap it up."

"Yeh. We ain't got all day time."

"Get goin', Rex. We got chores to do pretty soon."

Sheriff Rexwinkel shrugged, hitched up his clothes around his tubby body. "Well, I'm warning all of you. Trouble's coming out of this. You ain't heard the last of this." He bored his eyes into Pier.

"Let it. See if we care," Pier taunted boldly.

Sheriff Rexwinkel gulped. Then, bitterness curling his lips, he pointed his cane at a box of tools at his feet. "All right, Red Joe, hold it up so they can see. All right, men." He cleared his throat, gunned his voice. "How much am I given fer this fine box a tools, huh? Fine box a tools. Fine box. Got a wrench. Crescent. A hammer. A lot a fine good things you kin use any time, anywhere. A reg'lar speculation, men. A real speculation. How much for it, boys? Come now. How much for this first-class speculation? How much am I bid? How, how, how?"

"A penny," Pier said.

"A penny I got. A penny . . ." Sheriff Rexwinkel paused. "Hey, what's this?" There was a look in his eye as if at last he knew what he was in for.

"A penny."

Again the sheriff shrugged. "Okay. All right. Have your joke. A penny I got. Penny, penny, penny? How, how, how? Who'll give a quarter? Quarter, quarter, quarter?" Sheriff Rexwinkel sang out the hypnotic chant, pointed his cane from face to face like a teacher with a pointer trying to get a class of numskulls to speak up. Sheriff Rexwinkel paused again. "Now, look, fellows. How can you expect me to get worked up into this if you don't give me some encouragement? How can you expect Red Joe to pay off his honorable debts if you don't bid up?"

Otto spat. "You got a bid. Close the sale."

"Huh. Oh. Well, all right. All right." Sheriff Rexwinkel waved frenziedly. "But remember, you guys, Otto, Pier, you'll answer for this. A penny I got, penny, penny, penny. How, how, how? Quarter, quarter, quarter? Do I see a hand back there? There? Quarter, quarter, quarter? Going, going, going? Going once, going twice, going . . . a penny . . . who's got a quarter, quarter, quar—"

"Close it!" Otto roared.

"Sold to Pier Frixen for one lousy red cent, the cheapskate."

Pier leaped forward. "Take that back, you sour tub a lard! Back!"

Herman Brackx closed a powerful hand over Pier's shoulder. "Take it easy, man. Rex's an officer of the law. Can't call him names. Besides, if there's any fuss to be raised, let him be the first to raise it."

Pier mumbled, fished up a penny from his pocket. He handed it to Blacktail. "Receipt, please."

Blacktail stared at him with slanted, narrowing eyes. A sneer

worked into his square mustache. "You sure you want to do this, Frixen?"

"Yes."

Blacktail scribbled, licked his upper lip, handed Pier the receipt.

Pier pocketed it.

The sale rolled on. Sheriff Rexwinkel swung into it. His lips began to froth a little. He pointed at a cultivator. "How much am I bid for this bright brand-new John Deere, boys? It's seen but two seasons. Good as new. Got a dingus, a gohinkus there under the beam there that you don't see on the old ones. New. There. How much, boys? How, how, how? Somebody start'er off. How, how——"

"Five cents!" Otto barked.

"What?"

"Five cents."

"Five cents? Listen, fellows, this is going too far. I can't let——"

"Close it."

"Close it!"

Instantly another towering surge of guttural sound swept up from the mobbing black men, lashed against the law in massive tides.

Sheriff Rexwinkel swallowed, nodded, went on.

By two in the afternoon everything had been sold and returned to Red Joe.

Wild, red-faced men, smiling foolishly, yelling and cursing, swaggering, milled over the yard, streamed toward the house. Relieved, chattering women set out doughnuts and coffee. Great paws slapped massive backs. Children danced around elders, touched them, thinking them gods. Men grinned into one another's eyes.

Off to one side, Red Joe stood shaking his head.

"What's the matter?" Pier asked, smiling.

"I don't believe it."

Pier laughed.

Red Joe spread his bowed legs, looked at the ground. "I just don't believe it."

Pier handed him a batch of receipts. "Wal, this ought to help."

"Man, I just can't seem to believe it. My Lily of the Valley."

2. THE WIND BLOWS FREE

· I ·

DRY, MILD WINTER MONTHS FOLLOWED. NO SNOW fell. For thirty-four successive days the sun shone wide-eyed all day long on the land. The moon and the stars glittered dryly at night. Not a flake of moisture somersaulted through the January, February airs.

Warm winds became high winds. Gales snibbed the land. Dust swirled. Pier called it the winter of the red snow.

The warm days were good days to work in. Pier hauled his fall and winter manures, brought in an old haystack, cleaned his seed grain and sacked his seed corn, repaired all the harnesses, greased and sharpened the disk, put a new set of teeth in the harrow to im-

prove its bite, hauled water from the river when his well ran short.

He bought a new boar. He got a new bull from a Frisian farmer living near Sioux Center; promptly named the beast Âlde Hengist.

He filled the incubator with choice fertilized eggs.

Colonel and Topsy, too old at last to work, he sent to Ol' Spit Triggs's rendering plant. There wasn't enough feed around to let them die naturally of old age. In memory of them he gave their names to the two young geldings born of Maid and Mell in '33.

From the Grimovich boys he got a little collie puppy. He named it Shep. The old dog had been run over and killed by a car.

Because Nertha still complained about his coming into the house with dirty feet, Pier searched out an old plowshare from the junk pile in the grove, mixed some cement with hot water, set the share, sharp edge up, at the end of the walk, used it as a shoe scraper.

When Nertha complained that the old blue-gray linoleum in the kitchen was wearing through, Pier took a couple of dry sows to Sioux Falls and brought back a new roll, with green-yellow blocks.

. 2 .

One Sunday morning he awoke in a world narrowed to an arm's width by a fog. He called Nertha and Teo, bibbered his morning tea with them, went out to chore. As he walked to the barn with Teo, the enveloping fog smothered the light of his lantern to a dull orange blob.

When he and Teo came up to the house with the milk, dawn light was just beginning to mizzle through the fallen cloud. By the time the calves were fed and the milk pails rinsed, the trees came into view.

It was after breakfast before the mist cleared away, and it left a sugar world, a fairy world, a bubble world blown from mother-of-pearl. Branches and twigs were twice their normal size. Trees stretched out majestic arms dazzling with burning diamonds. White-yellow sparkles, blue flames, purple spurts, crazy gleams streamed over the buildings and the fences and the milk rack and the bushes. The world was all white below and all blue above. Not a stroke of red or black was in evidence. The sight of a cottontail bobbing was a shock to the eye. It was a sin to walk in the baby-pure, white, hoarfrosted universe.

Pier looked at the outdoors entranced. Nertha too came to the window to wonder, letting her dishes go. Teo was in the living room playing the phonograph.

Nertha leaned against him. "It's as pretty as heaven. It's like when I was a little girl once. Snow-white." She giggled a little; and, despite her aging face, smiled like a child seeing her first Christmas tree.

Pier nodded, brushing her silver hair with his lips. Bands tightened around his chest. He breathed over her.

"We should go to church," she whispered. Her hands were wet and she wiped them on her soiled apron. A hand slid down her hip, paused.

Pier nodded.

"Pier, this is a new year, not?"

"Yes. Sure." He was moved by her sudden talk.

"We're safe here?"

"For this year."

She stirred. "You'd like another son?"

Pier blinked. "It's a cinch I wouldn't show him the door."

She turned toward him, threw a suddenly willful, strangely maidenish glance into his eyes, then looked at the buttons on the bib of his overall.

Pier recognized it instantly. He fired. His eyes rolled. The white world became a gold world, a red world. He pressed her close. "Nertha?"

Her lips thickened. She looked down modestly. "Not here," she said, "not here."

"In our bedroom then?"

"No. Teo's in the livin' room there."

"But——"

"Wait. I'll go up to the guest room an' then you come later."

She left.

And soon, mumbling, casting a quick guilty glance at Teo as he went past him through the stair door, Pier climbed to the guest room in the south wing.

The phonograph music swelled in the house.

Afterward Pier went outdoors to work, in the white sugar world. A crust of hoarfrost tumbled from an eve. He stooped, picked up a piece of it, tasted it. It had a sweetness but it did not feed much.

· 3 ·

A few weeks went by.

Then for eight straight days a gruff southwest wind raked the earth.

On the ninth day it let up a little, and Pier, sure that the worst was over, pursed his lips for a happy whistle, got ready to start his field work. Normal times were coming again.

He sang. The animals were swelling with young, the fields lay waiting for seed, Nertha was pregnant . . . ae, the whole world was stirring.

As he milked in the barn, he cocked his ear every few minutes to catch the tune of the wind humming in the opening of the door, wondering, hoping that it would stay down for the day. He pulled steadily on the pink teats. *Ping-tish. Ping-tush. Ping-izzell. Ping-uzzell. Sjt. Sjt. Bruzt. Bruzt.*

He sniffed the air. He thrust his tongue out to taste it. There was still a little dust riding.

Between cows he leaned over the lower barn door, studying the red-brown haze in the southwest. Was it a new storm? Or only the dust of yesterday still coasting to earth? He studied the air as it drifted past the dark square of an open hog-house door. He coughed.

After breakfast he harnessed the young mares and led them to the tank to drink. The gray horses sipped thirstily. Twice Pier was about to pull them away when all four, Betts and Belle, Young Maid and Young Mell, quickly reached down for more.

Teo came up from the hog house. He looked at the ground. His young, restless, scarred fingers twitched on his cap. His cheeks were bright red, his eyes lucent green-blue. "Got the hog house clean, Dad. Anything else I gotta do before I go to school?"

"No. I guess not. But be sure to tell your prof ye're stayin' home for the seedin'."

Teo bubbled a weak protest.

"What's that?"

Teo glanced at him a second, almost vindictively. "Nothin'."

"I'm sorry, boy. But I need you." Pier rubbed his chin. "Boy, this year, this year we gotta do it or we're done."

"You always say that. Every spring. And every spring I get sucked in by that fairy tale."

Pier growled. "Well, it isn't my fault, is it? I can't shake rain out a the sky, kin I?"

Teo mumbled.

Pier cleared his throat, spat. Bitter words rose to his tongue. Vaguely, deep within, he recognized that he feared the darting mind of his son.

The horses looked up from their lapping at last. Relieved at something to do, Pier led them away. They followed, hanging back a little. Their harnesses squeaked, jingled. Their heavy footfalls sluffed in the flour-fine loess.

Pier glanced at the sky. The sun was still obscured, the heavens still brown.

He hitched the horses to the disk, turned the grease cups until the fatty substance splatted out of the axle vents, adjusted a hay bag on the hard spring seat, and, drawing his red-and-black mackinaw collar close around his neck, crawled on. He giddaped the horses. The traces tightened. The two-horse eveners wrestled against each other. The disk squealed like a hundred pigs in agony. He was off, past the woodshed, up the lane.

He turned through the gate by the orchard, headed the horses northeast to start a cater-cornered strip across the big fifty. He stopped a moment to set the disk.

Just as he was jerking back the second lever, a blue car came over the rise. It slowed, pulled to one side of the road, stopped across from him. It was County Agent Pederson and Ol' Spit Triggs.

The door of the car opened. Ol' Spit Triggs looked out.

"Hi, neighbors," Pier greeted.

"G'morn. See ye're up bright an' early."

Pier nodded. "Up before day an' dew. As usual."

Both men stepped down through the ditch and, opening the barbwires of the fence for each other, crowded up around Pier, smiling.

Pier fussed with the lines. He shook them a little. The horses lifted an ear. Pier stirred on the hay bag, fitting himself well into its softnesses.

Ol' Spit Triggs pulled out a plug of tobacco. "Chew?"

"Don't mind if I do." Pier bit off a lusty chunk, offered it to Pederson.

Pederson shook his head. "Never use it."

Pier returned it to Ol' Spit Triggs, chewed a few moments. "Nice weather."

"Yeh."

"I look for it to rain pitchforks pretty soon. That's why I'm startin' field work so early."

Pederson nodded. "I was wonderin' why all the hurry."

"Wal, the groun' is soft. It works."

"That it does."

Pier looked at the sky, at the ground. Scuffs of dust rustled around the hoofs of the horses, around and about the roots of last year's faded cornstalks. "No, really, I figure it to rain pitchforks pretty soon. Nature is bound to even up sometime for all that hell dust we had this winter."

Pederson nodded. His eyes studied the ditch running down the hillside into the orchard. The old man's eyes flicked. "Got any water trouble?"

"Some."

"Usin' the river then?"

"Sure. But if this keeps up much longer, it'll dry too."

Pederson nodded. His old face screwed up into a web of working wrinkles.

Pier was impatient to be on. It was the first day of spring and he was full of work, not idle talk. He shuffled the lines in his mittened hands. He chewed. "Wal, you birds, cough it up. What's on your minds? Any time a fat ass like Ol' Spit here gets up before breakfast, something's churnin'."

Ol' Spit Triggs rolled his eyes, hoisted up his belly, said, "Someday I'm gonna take exception to them words."

Pier laughed.

"I mean it."

"Take it easy, Spit. No harm meant. Come. Tell me. Another penny sale comin' up somewheres?"

Pederson said, "No, not that. It's just that we noticed that your name wasn't on the list."

"What list?" Pier asked, sharpening.

"The list of farmers who've signed up for the corn and hog program."

Pier nodded. He had heard of it. Teo had told him about it.

"Any particular reason you ain't signed up yet?" Pederson asked, aiming his sober gray eyes directly into Pier's.

Pier chewed. "No. No. Just that I don't like it."

Ol' Spit Triggs spat. The slowly rising wind caught the spinning brown globe of spittle, and carried it and flupped it on Pier's foot. Ol' Spit Triggs said, "After that fine work at Red Joe's, you gonna turn out to be a slacker now, Pier?"

Pier hardened. "I run my farm my own way in my own time. I don't bother nobody, an' nobody's gonna bother me."

Pederson broke in. "Spit, let's not have any loose talk." Pederson turned to Pier. "Frixen, you don't get us. What we mean is that if the prices of corn and hogs are to stay up, we've all got to raise less. The guv'ment's askin' everybody to cut his corn acreage twenty-five per cent, his sows twenty-five per cent. If we do it together, we ease the market, raise the prices."

"Cut my acreage?"

"Yes. All of us. Together. Together just like at Red Joe's."

Pier looked at the ground.

Pederson went on, "The guv'ment's even offering to buy your extra hogs for a good price."

Pier chewed, made up his mind. "Naw. Ain't int'rested."

"Why not?"

"Wal, I don't like the guv'ment to come messin' into my life. I've got along without it so far. Besides, there's too many rules. Regulations. All that flapdoodle. Binds a man down."

"Is it binding a man down to get cost-of-production prices? Is it binding a man down to be making a living?"

"Naw. Ain't int'rested."

"Look, Pier. The guv'ment ain't interested in bossing you. You'll boss yourself. After you sign up we won't even come around to smell your place, let alone to check up on you. We'll leave that to your conscience. Ain't that fair enough?"

"Fair or not, I'm agin anybody tellin' me what to do. I'm independent, I am. I run this farm myself. I don't ask nobody about nothin', do as I please, an' am my own boss."

Ol' Spit Triggs coughed. His belly bounced. His red tongue licked at tobacco-dripping whiskers. "Pier, all your friends are in. Joined up. Even the Bolshevik Grimovich boys. What'll happen is that

you'll reap the benefit a their jomin'. Reap a benefit you ain't earned."

"Makes no difference to me."

"They'll be sore."

"Let 'em. That's their hard luck." He paused, narrowed his red-gray brows. "Say, Spit, how come ye're such a patriot all of a sudden?"

Pederson said quickly, "All the farmers here'bouts are busy. An' Triggs here, not having anything to do this morning, offered to come along."

"Huh."

"Your mind is made up then?"

Pier nodded.

"You sure?"

Pier shifted on his hay bag. He flipped the lines a little. "You know, my son Teo was readin' where they was throwing away hogs. An' cows. Floatin' 'em down the Missouri."

Pederson smiled a little. "I've heard the rumor."

"Is it true then?"

"Pier, can you imagine anybody throwing away a good eating pig?"

Pier puzzled. "That's what I thought. You see, I ain't much on religion. But still, I believe we've got to work all we kin to make sure we've done our duty by nature an' by God. It's wrong to cut down acreage, to hold back hog breedin'. It's wrong to throw away pork an' beef. An' grain. Wrong. That was proved a long time ago in the Bible. Joseph, he knew. You see, I believe God wants us to work nature to the brim, get what we kin, an' He'll do the rest." Pier chewed slowly. "Besides, nature is an ornery bitch. A slippery one. You've got to work her to the full. Why, look. Just suppose we hadn' a farmed to the limit in the good years, where would the country ha' been the poor years? Broke. Busted. Nope, I'm agin this corn an' hog program."

Pederson shook his head. "You'll be sorry someday."

"Maybe. Maybe. But if I am, it'll be my own choosin'."

Ol' Spit Triggs's eyes rolled. He looked toward the house. He coughed hoarsely in the wind. "How's the wife?"

"Good." Pier's face suddenly broke into a wide smile.

Ol' Spit Triggs cocked an eye. "You look happy. It can't be you got another one in the oven?"

"Could be." Pier beamed. "An', mister, when he comes, an' grows up, watch my smoke."

The men smiled.

Pederson said, as he started through the fence with Ol' Spit Triggs, "Well, if you change your mind, Frixen, just drive down to the town hall and we'll be glad to sign you up. Any time before you get your corn planted."

"I'll see."

They drove off.

Pier muttered to himself, "Like hell I will." Then he giddaped the horses, slapped the lines over their backs. He chevied over the big fifty to make up for lost time.

But even before Pier could get halfway across the field, the wind began to brush up swiftly. By the time he reached the foot of Red Bluff, directly cater-corner across the field from the yard, his horses were walking in whirlwinds of dust.

He glanced back. The soil the disk churned up was not as dark with moisture as other years. The earth was drying to its core.

At the end, he turned around, started back. The two halves of the disk, constantly grinding against each other, like two stubborn iron onions, cut and sliced and tossed the earth about. The disk groaned and squealed.

The horses bucked into the tailing wind. Their manes flowed with brown dust. They snorted. They lowered their heads to the ground. They wavered, drifted off from the straight rows.

Glimpsing past the edge of his mackinaw, Pier guided them as best he could. The track of his previous crossing was already erased by the whisseling southwest wind.

Lips burned from the dryness. The nose stung from the uprush of gritty air. Sharp bits of sand ground between the eyelids and eyeball.

Then he saw it; an unbelievable thing.

On from the west came great clouds of dust, rising from the far slopes of the earth. They boiled up like thousands of mountain-high, madly growing mushrooms. The dusky heavens blackened. The whole earth went into an uproar, exploding skyward, throwing chunks of dirt and humus into the air. It rushed toward him. Titanic

winds shoved. The mass of brown-black harrowing horror droned toward him.

He stopped on the crest of the rise, stood up against the wind to have a look around. With swelling breath and widened eyes, and stiffened body, he watched the black destruction drive toward his yard. He saw Nertha come out on the walk, look up, look around, run back into the house. A second later the brown deluge of dust enveloped the entire farm.

The end of the world was coming toward him. It rushed up the inclining hill. Toward him came a turmoil that was the unraveling edge of the world. In a moment he would fall off into an endless black void, into the deeps of the universe below. The earth was vanishing. Unraveling.

He stared upward. He looked up so sharply his Adam's apple hurt. The massive wall was rising beyond the heavens. It was sweeping the stars out of the skies. Its height was so overpowering that Pier had impulses to vomit. His misery, his feeling of abysmal insignificance, was turning him inside out.

He swallowed, gripped himself. Quickly he turned the horses around, away from the wind. They whirled readily. They fluttered nostrils, whinnied. They lowered their heads, waited.

Pier drew his mackinaw collar up over his head, waited too. He drew out his red handkerchief, wet it with spit. He tied it around his nose. He cowered inside his clothes, hovering.

Strange bluish-green lights played about the disk. When Pier accidentally touched steel he got a shock. The air became charged with electricity; sparkled as if it were full of flying fireflies.

Warm yet chilling wind rushed up underneath him. In a wink of an eye the levers before him vanished. Streams of black dust poured around him, upon him, into him. It tried to choke him, throttle him. Furies tore at his coat.

He huddled. Miserably he clung to his seat. He feared the gale might even be strong enough to throw the heavy iron disk around. He trembled. Never before had he seen such a horror of whirling chaos.

The mighty storm lashed. It struck him. It smashed at him. It blasted the earth around him. It geysered loess thousands of feet into vanishing heights above. It struck, struck, struck. Once more and again. Ever and anon it beat upon him and blasted him and beat upon him.

He nodded. It was the Âlde Han at last. Ae, and this time He would get him, strangle him. He didn't have a chance to survive. Clinging to his steel seat, holding on, his head down, his face deep in his mackinaw, his mind raced around in his skull. It milled with thoughts. He pondered on life, on what he had done so far.

He had been born, he had grown up. He had eaten, he had dunged.

He had pushed his father off his shoulders. He had bred and raised a son, who, in turn, was getting ready to push him off his shoulders.

Ae, there wasn't much to be proud of. It was a poor accounting.

Ae, life was like grass. It grew in the spring, it greened in the summer, it grayed in the fall, it rotted in the winter; and, the next spring, it made room for the new grass.

Ae, and now he was dying in the middle of a land that had gone crazy, that had lost all reason, that had lost all sense.

The storm brulled; bombommed.

He waited. He was sure he was being buried alive.

He waited an hour.

He waited two hours. He choked. He coughed up muddy spittle. Sometimes, through the tossing lines, he could feel the horses stirring in the brown dark ahead. He dared not open his eyes to look.

Corn leaves cut at his back. Cornstalks swapt him. Weeds whipped him. Bits of flying clods pelted him. An old weathered corn ear hit him.

And then something heavy and big hit him. It bounced against his head, rolled over his shoulder, fell into his huddled lap. It snuggled against his chest. It was as soft as a puppy, as slim as a cat.

Pier opened his eyes cautiously, wonderingly. What strange creature was seeking haven in his arms? He stared. Meek ears long on its neck, bloody eyes blinded, a lonesome wild jack rabbit lay trembling in his cradling arms.

At last, just as Blacktail's modern-day siren shrilled up from Starum, the storm began to abate. The sound of the noon-hour siren was like the scraping of tin on steel.

The wind lay down. Slowly the revolving air stilled. Gradually the air cleared a little.

Pier opened his eyes to mere slits. He saw the levers again. Beyond stood the horses, slouched on two legs. The gray horses shook their heads, snorted.

Pier moved. He rolled his shoulders slowly, loosening the numbness in his arms, his hands, his finger tips. He turned on the steel seat, awakening the muscles in his thighs, his calves, his toe tips. He stirred. Dust spilled off his shoulders. He took off his cap. It showered puffs of dust into his eyes. Dust poured out of his gray-red hair.

Pier looked around. All about lay drifted banks of dust, sand dunes. What had once been a field of dead cornstalks was now a shifting desert. Behind, where two hours before his disk had cut out a crissing pattern in the soil, there was not the faintest trace of his going.

Coughing, he headed the horses home, into the dying wind. He cradled the lonesome jack rabbit.

He drove down the lane, turned past the woodshed.

He saw that the chimney was dead. He sat upright. He stopped the horses, stepped off, gently laid the tamed rabbit in the door of the woodshed, ran into the kitchen. "Nertha!"

No answer.

"Nertha girl!"

Still no answer.

Agonized, he ran through the dust-carpeted rooms. They were empty.

He rushed outside, searching through the brown, eerie, noon-hour dusk.

Dust dunes rippled, billowed everywhere.

He ran around the south side of the house. He stumbled. In the riding dust it was difficult to see just where the floating air began and the rising earth ended. He gasped. A great mounding immane pile of dust reached to the eaves of the house, fully fourteen feet high. Terrified, he ran the other way, past the box elder. Again his feet beat into soft, flour-fine streams of billowing dust drifts. He saw that the privy had vanished, and the pump beneath the windmill, and the fences beside it.

Crying, he stumbled across the yard to the barn.

When he jerked open the door, the cows lowed at him. The aged trotters, Queen and Daise, neighed.

He jumped inside. He stared at the cattle, the calves, the horses. Each had been masked with wet bits of sack. For a second he was sure Teo had stayed home from school to save the animals.

Something rustled in a corner. He looked around, wild-eyed. There, seated against the wall, with a sack serving as a wimple over her face, her green eyes staring, sat Nertha.

He started toward her. "Nertha?"

She looked.

"Woman," he murmured, "girl. Good girl."

Nertha gathered herself to her feet, stood up. Dust cascaded from her shoulders. "Pier?"

He nodded. "Yes, girl."

"I was worried, Pier."

He swallowed. "You're a good girl, Nertha." He waved at the cattle.

She looked down, fumbled with her clothes, stood on one foot. "I dunno. I was thinkin' . . . Maybe instead I should a gone to church like everybody else did. Edna. Gert. An' left everything in the hands a God."

"Church?"

"Yes. But then, I knew you'd be mad if I didn't try to save the animals first."

"Do you mean to say they had church this morning? In town?"

"Sure. I didn't tell you, but yesterday, after all those dry days, they decided to have a special prayer day for rain. Domeny Beckstrom said he'd come down an' pray God. Central gave a gen'ral ring on the phone."

Pier cracked a laugh. "Huh. No wonder the Lord was mad today."

Nertha's eyes crossed at the blasphemy.

Pier patted her shoulder. "Never you worry, girl. What you did today was the best prayer ever prayed, church or no church."

He nodded to himself. He could see the church full of solemn, stunned farmers. Beside them would be cowed wives. In the dusky, glowering interior the only thing alive would be the gleam of mothers' fleshy teats as they gave suck to their babies. He patted her again. "They talk about rain making. Wal, if what you did today don't scare up a rain out a the sky, then I don't know the last of it."

She said nothing, looked down, fooled with her clothes.

Pier became aware of a stillness about. He looked up, listened. It was as if an enormous cave were opening, were about to sigh, about to cough.

It became stock-still.

A noise scurried toward them. It grew. It roared. It bellowed.

The barn shook. The beams cracked. The stanchions and the cows jostled each other.

There was a sucking sound; then a crashing upon the earth.

Pier ran to a window. He brushed away the cobwebs. "Why, the old mill's fell down. Why."

Beyond, barely discernible, stood the four horses still hitched to the disk, lonely, heads down, manes drooping, tails to the wind. They had turned around by themselves.

· 4 ·

The dry, hot spring droned on. Creeks dried. Tarns dried. Weeds in the fenny blew away. Stiving dust billowed up from the chapped soils. Wells filled with dust. Subsurface lakes vanished. Bark peeled from the willows in the slough.

All through April the dust storms rode. For twenty-two consecutive days the skies were inflamed with red, smoke-gray dusts.

Highway maintenance crews, like bugs startled up from overturned logs, scurried out of sheds with their snowplows to clear the roads of dust drifts.

May came; the hottest May ever recorded. Temperatures held steady in the hundreds. Not a film of moisture appeared in the sky. The few clouds born in the Rockies vanished the moment they appeared on the plains. Tough tornadic wind squalls skinned the land of its humus fell.

Disease crept into the scaly skin. Vermin crawled in it. Chinch bugs thrived in the dying carcass of the old lady earth.

The days of June swirled by, puffs of wind, blasts of heat. The sandy soils dried, became loose. The clay soils cracked, became cement. Sandy loams, silt loams, clay loams shriveled beneath the burning skies.

The greens died.

The weeds pumped furiously. They sucked loess for water, found dust instead. Presently they fell slack, grayed.

The trees thrust stalwart arms into the sky, thrust powerful suck-

ing hoses into the earth, deep, down to the subsoils, into the fundament. But they died too. The waters of the old lady had passed away.

The tame animals were helpless. Long ago they had surrendered to man their deed to life. They awaited his wisdom. He would see them through.

The cows waited, chewed air for cud.

The horses whinnied, grew thin, fluttered nostrils.

The pigs rooted deep into the dust for wet roots.

The chickens chased flying specks of soil.

Still the dust came on. Columns of it reached from the very floor of the earth into the ceiling of heaven itself, from the fundament to the nostrils of the sun.

The wind was a sweeper. It stroked a great broom across the wide walk of the prairie earth. When the walk was moist, the skies were glass-clear; when the walk was dry, the sun choked.

People suffered. Colds, whooping cough, pleurisy, dust pneumonia, tuberculosis, milk leg, ravaged them. Coughs bent their bodies into snapping hoops. Fevers wrinkled their brows.

At last July came; came hot, came wet. When it came hot, it killed horses and men. When it came wet, it fried.

The hardy corn that had survived the shriveling dry days burned now too. Pastures blew up. Haylands scabbed.

At last the blinded plainsman had nothing left but a high wind and a bone-dry soil.

Birds flew away.

The bewildered robin hesitated on a gray post east of the woodshed. Stunned, half blinded by the dust, it looked around, hopped down to peek at a wormlike twig. Then, with a fluttering of sand-frayed wings, it drove off for the moist airs of Wisconsin.

The swallow, returning to its mud hut in the hog barn, found it gone. It hovered near where its nest had once clung to an upright. It banked and fluttered over uneasy, rooting pigs. Then suddenly it saw. The mud nest, drying, had fallen off. The swallow screamed,

dived down, shot up. The pigs were tearing her nest and her young to shreds.

The sparrow sat stunned in the bare limbs of the orchard. It huddled and drew in its neck and dropped gray dung and flew off.

The crows built nests out of scraps of barbwire.

The hummingbird vanished.

The meadow lark sang with the harsh craking accents of a blackbird.

The redwing cried.

The motherly old soil, bound to the ball of the earth, could not protest at the clumsy love-making. Breasts flung out, arms wide, black nubile thighs bare to the sun, it could do nothing but suffer man his pleasure.

And the wild animals suffered.

The badger, eater of gophers and mice and beetles and snakes, burrowed deeper into the hide of the earth.

The cottontail and jack rabbit, nibbler of the bark of young trees, and of grass and red clover and vegetables, thirsted and starved.

The fox and the coyote, killer of rabbits and poultry, became more crafty.

The mink, devourer of grubs and frogs and lizards and eggs and fish, ran to the north country.

The mole, ravager of roots and worms, dug deep.

The muskrat died when the water plants died.

The weasel was the only one who fattened for a time: chirking crickets and yellow-bellied grasshoppers, hatching by the billions, provided him with an abundance of sweet white meat.

Slowly the rivers of dust unraveled the black skin of the woman. Slowly she paled and sickened. Yellow-head hilltops pimpled her tawny-black hide.

Old Dreamer Pederson, doing his few chores on his five-acre plot overlooking the Mounds near Blood Run Creek to the south, nodded. "Fools! Let them go to a church to hear their soothsayers, let them go to their salvers to close over the mouths of their wounds. They wouldn't listen to the hard-iron facts of a friend. Oh no. Fools."

Pederson went to the woodpile. He hacked at a log until it fell

in half, split into quarters, into eighths. Despite the dusk of a dusty evening, and his old age, the old man's keen eyes and sharp-edged ax hit exactly in the center of the wood each time. "Fools. What's one going to do with these children? They won't look around. They won't see what's happened, even if it's right under their noses. How is one to get them to worship the true God in the great cathedral of the outdoors? The fools."

He looked up; he had caught himself talking. He glanced sheepishly around to make sure he was alone, that no one had heard him.

He carried the wood to his one-story farmhouse. He entered, dropped the wood into the fuel box by the stove. He looked at his watch, decided he had time to feed the chickens before he started the stove for supper.

He wiped sweat off his thin forehead. His thin blue shirt was soaked. He pushed back his tan cap, rolled up his sleeves. In the unseasonably warm March, chopping was hot, hard work.

He went outdoors. He scooped up a pail of grain from a feedbin north of the chicken house. He scattered the golden manna over the yard. Fluttering pullets, old gray hens, red-combed cocky roosters, followed after. He was a Joseph feeding his tribe.

"Fools," he thought bitterly, "fools. If they'd only listen. Give an ear to brass-tack facts."

He nodded. "But that's the way it goes. The memory of the people is short. As fleeting as a breath."

He nodded. "Well, they got what they deserved. Dug their own grave. They can lay in it too. Poverty. Drought. Disease. Eroded hills. They sucked the land of its riches, gambled madly, gave no heed to the warnings, hardly noticed the first shock in 1911, the second in 1921, the third last year. Well, they got what they had coming. Over forty per cent of them renters now. With most of the rest so heavily mortgaged they're worse off than the renters."

He scattered another handful of grain. Hens followed. "Fools. And so now they have to hire a domeny to pray God for rain. Fools. God isn't that literal. God isn't that cheap that he follows man-made rules and regulations, that he heeds the man-made Laws of Nature. Fools."

Pederson asked, holding aloft his arm, scattering grain to the two-legged creatures, "Huh, if they wanted to hear sermons, why didn't they listen to mine? I talked to them plenty. I gave them beatitudes."

He stood still. "What a sermon I could give them now, if they'd ask me. What a sermon. I'd blister their backsides."

He stood, thinking. "And why not? I feel as ordained to preach on the ways of man on this earth, and his sinning, as any domeny living today. Yessir."

Once more he looked around to make sure he was alone. And then, though he realized he was probably a little senile to be talking alone by himself, he started in. His feelings, his thoughts, his words would out. He had a sermon to say. And he had to say it.

"Well, first, I'd read them a passage out of the scripture as I know it. I would read to them out of the Gospel as lived by the Lion of the Great Alone.

" 'And the Lion of the Great Alone, the Almighty Lion of Chaos, blinked, and It looked casually at the earth, and It saw impersonally the miserable evidences of man's handiwork. And seeing, and being revolted thereby, It left man to his fate.'

"Yes, so I would read the text of my sermon.

"And then I'd preach. In parables.

"As follows:

" 'After a time, man crossed a mountain and came to a valley. There he found a dusky woman of exceeding beauty and worth. And he fell in love with her, became enamored of her. And he took her, possessed her, and made her his own.

" 'And after a time he discovered that the woman he had taken to his breast was a sister, and a wife, and a mother to him.

" 'As his sister she played games with him, hunted and swam and fished with him.

" 'As his wife, she gave him fruits: corn, wheat, grapes, honey, milk.

" 'As his mother, she gave him shelter. In her he built mounds and crept into the womb of them and sheltered his bare limbs from the winter chills. He did this as the Mound Builder of ancient times, as the terp builder in Europe, as the sod-hut maker on the plains of America. And elsewhere.

" 'But man, being part fool at heart, a restless wanderer, worked her to death. And she, aging prematurely, and wrinkling, became a creature despised in his eyes, and he sickened of her, and climbed another mountain, going west, and found a new valley. And again he discovered a lovely dusky woman. And her too he made his own.

" 'But, once more, this new woman he slaved, worked to death, and she aged too soon, and he sickened of her, became tired of woman, and deserted her. He climbed still another mountain, going west, and discovered still another valley and a new woman.

" 'Always he found new valleys, and new lovely dusky women. And always he overworked them, and always they aged.

" 'And man, the fool, never learned. Never. Always he put the blame on the woman, always he claimed that it wasn't his fault she made a poor mate.' "

Pederson waved his arm, scattering grain.

An old hen at his feet, lifting her red-combed head, and staring at him with beady eyes, craked. "Ae, ae, ae, ae, ae, how it hurts me."

"But actually, the old lady, she's all right. It's only that she's been mistreated. Treat a woman right and she'll treat you right. Mistreat her and she'll miscarry; even leave you. She is human, palpable, friable. She is made of the same stuff man is.

"Man is born of the earth and the earth is born of man. All the chemicals, all the ingredients, all the parts that are to be found in man's body are to be found in hers.

"The soil breathes. Its nostrils are the plants and the trees and the animals and man.

"The soil digests. It digests even more efficiently than man's alimentary canal. Throw iron into it, or steel, or even radium, and the old lady will decompose it, digest it.

"The soil has blood. As long as she keeps her skin, the waters flowing under it will bring to all plants and trees and man all the nutrients they need.

"Man, the fool, has been reckless with his wife. He has behaved foolishly on her breasts and her thighs. Here in America he is losing her, will lose her, has already lost half of her.

"When he came through the mountain passes of Pennsylvania and Virginia and Georgia, he found an innocent black virgin. He saw convexes and concaves of rich humus flowing endlessly away to the horizon. Grass was blowing in the virgin's sleepy, slumbrous eyes.

"Snorting, excited, nervous, he attacked her with his ax. He ripped her. He tore her up with his plow.

"And she, a true woman, suffered it meekly. She waited for him to learn, to become the lover."

Pederson waved a hand, spread his fingers, threw grain.

The old gray hen, scratching, first with her left yellow leg while balancing on her right, then with her right yellow leg while balancing on her left, ahead, back, craked, "Ae, ae, ae, ae, ae, how it hurts me."

The old man led on, a Jacob wrestling with the Lion of the Great Alone, lifting his voice. "But man never did learn, never at last considered her a mate. Always, and ever on, he ripped her, he raped her, he misused her, he abused her.

"And finally, of course, the woman could stand it no longer. She reacted violently, had convulsions, had hiccups, tossed her fleshes to the skies.

"And she sickened. And her skin peeled from her.

"And then into the bayous, into the deltas, into the bottoms of the seas, flowed her tissues, her skins. Her dark nubile fleshes, once so lovely in the Indian moonlight, were gone forever.

"She was too good. The thousands of years she spent preparing herself for the mating, for the love-making, for the bearing, were spilled away in a few short years. And by an oaf who laughed at her efforts, at her nest-making."

The old man stopped. He gazed through the red evening shadows, at the Hills of the Lord to the southwest. He sorrowed. "O sister, O wife, O mother. How I remember thee. How I recall thy greatnesses, now gone, thy soil swelling when the rains fell, and holding it all in thy breasts against the dry days.

"But he raped thee, and now thy enemy, and his, the impersonal Lion of the Great Alone in the skies, is tearing off thy dark humus robe. The black blizzards rage, the coarse floods roar."

It became dark on the yard. Night came on.

"Fool. Such a fool.

"Man assumes that the soil is eternal.

"It is not.

"The old lady, like man, is only a tiny creature in the vast outspread of chaos. And the endlessly undulating stretches of outspread chaos care not a snap of the fingers, not a whit, for either. Whether she or he thrives does not interest chaos. His dying, her dying, will not disturb it, affect it, will not contort chaos into cosmos, or wreck cosmos into chaos.

"Thus, if man values his life at all, he must learn to love her. If he does not, if he does not replace the clothing he takes from her, if he

does not protect her, the eagle-winged winds of the Wild will carry her away.

"The old lady is mortal. Like man, she has been dying ever since birth. Always and ever, in the running out of eternity, she is losing her oceanic pastures to the winds, to the swamps, to the seas, slowly exposing her bones, slowly uncovering her ribs to the rotting airs."

A flock of wild geese, lost, going south, flew over. The whisseling of their whipping wings was near.

"Chilly little laboratory technicians take comfort in the belief that before the rivers and the winds can completely unravel the hills and the fertile valleys, the globe will have contorted itself and have sprung forth new continents from the seas, boosting them out of the swamp waters like dinosaurs rising up dripping.

"Huh. By the time the earth ball gets around to bulging new muscles out of her birth waters, it will have been too late for man. By that time the generations of man will have been unraveled too.

"To save in his own lifetime what is still left of her, what is still good of her, man must hurry. He must haste to cover her with soft green clothes again."

3. MISCARRIAGE

. I .

TWO MONTHS AFTER PIER HAD WRESTLED WITH THE titanic March winds, Nertha collapsed on the floor by the kitchen stove. Pier was having his afternoon tea at the time, sitting in his worn armchair with his feet in the fuel box.

Instantly his chair came down on all fours. *Ka-thung.* He reached back to set his rattling cup and saucer on the table, jumped up. "Nertha! Girl!"

Stooping, he turned her over on her back. Her body was as limp and as heavy as a sack of meal. When he picked her up in his arms, she began to jump like a rabbit kicking in death throes.

Pier shagged her to the bedroom. He stretched her out on the bed,

lifting her head and laying it straight on the pillow, straightening out a doubled leg. Convulsions wrestled in her body, heaving her sloppy breasts, rolling her tongue out of her mouth, tossing her eyes in their sockets. Her face became as gray as aged flour.

"Nertha girl. Hey!" He slapped her, trying to revive her. But her body only quivered.

Again, a tumult threshed in her fleshes.

Pier ran to the door, shouted out over the yard, "Teo! Teo!"

A moment passed, then Teo's sweaty face appeared in the doorway of the horse barn. He had been manuring out the stalls. "Yeh?"

"C'mere. Quick. Yer ma's gone funny."

Teo leaped through the door, gangled swiftly through the barnyard gate, bounded over the dust dune by the box elder. In a flash he was in the house, his breath coursing wildly, eyes wide.

Together they rushed into the bedroom. Just as they stooped over her another spasm came on.

"Did y'u call Doc?" Teo suddenly snapped.

"No. Didn't think of it yit."

"Good God! That's the first thing," Teo said, almost angrily. He clumped to the telephone, rang.

Pier's eyes opened. He was startled by the boy's abrupt manner, amazed at the boy's self-assurance on the phone. For the moment, the boy seemed big, domineering, was actually a man. And the boy's green-blue eyes . . . so like Nertha's . . . it was almost as if the spirit of the dying Nertha were being reincarnated in the boy right before his eyes, as if her spirit were at last getting in its licks at him through the boy. He blinked.

She stirred under his hand. He looked. Another tremor waved through her. Her tongue popped out. Spittle bubbled on her slavering lips.

Watching the spasmodic whirlwinds wrestling through her, Pier worried that it had something to do with her pregnant womb, that he was losing both her and the coming child.

Teo towered in the doorway, his cotton-blond hair reaching to the doorhead.

Pier asked, "Doc comin'?"

"Right away."

"What'd he say?"

"Said to keep her cool. Keep cold packs around her an' on her forehead."

Pier nodded. "Wal, you gonna get them, or must I?"

Teo growled, stumped off to the kitchen.

Pier kneeled by the bed. He put his arm over Nertha. He patted her. He soothed her. He brushed white-silver hair from her face and nose and eyes. Poor woman, he thought. She's worked too hard.

Her skin was soft to his touch. Remnants of girlhood still lingered in her aging skin. He touched her lips, remembered the kisses he had once sown there. He stroked her shoulders, her arms. He took her hands, stroked them. He wiped tears on the sleeve of his heavy outdoor jacket. He had been cruel to his wife, hadn't treated her right.

A light wind was driving outside and it reached inside the house. He shivered.

Poor woman. Poor woman.

The work of saving the cows had been too much for her. Had Teo only stayed home that day. Or had he himself but dampered his eagerness to get the spring field work started. If only. Ae. Poor woman.

Another spasm galloped in her frame. Pier held his breath, afraid that the premature casting of the young had begun.

A half hour later, Dr. Helder drove on the yard. He stepped briskly into the bedroom. He was very old. His twig-thin hands were covered with thick wriggling blue-black veins. "Well, and what seems to be the trouble here?"

"Wal, Doc, I dunno . . ."

A convulsion doubled her up.

Dr. Helder watched for a second; then, nodding, quickly opened his black suitcase battered gray at the edges, took out a hypodermic needle, uncapped a small bottle, screwed the two together, dabbed her arm with a wad of cotton soaked in antiseptic, gave her an injection. Nertha quieted instantly. Her eyes closed. In a moment she seemed to be sleeping. Her hands stilled.

Dr. Helder stepped back, wiping the needle in the cotton. He pursed his lips. "When did this come on?"

"Why, only this afternoon. An hour ago. I was sittin' drinkin' an extry cup a tea. Teo had already had his, an' had gone back to the barn. Manurin'."

"H'mm. She's been . . . Oho. So. You're expectin'."

Pier nodded dumbly.

"H'mm. Not so good." Dr. Helder shook his head.

Pier offered, "Maybe she overworked herself, that day in the dust storm. She worked like a slave savin' the animals. Like she always does."

"Most country wives do."

"Wal, Doc, it wouldn' a happened if Teo hadn't gone off to school that day. I had a half a mind to keep the boy home, but, somehow, I didn't go through with it."

"Huh. Even if a dozen sons had stayed home from school that day she would still have worked like a slave. No, don't blame the boy. Or yourself." Dr. Helder studied her a moment. "I guess she's gone off to sleep. Let's step out of here." Dr. Helder led the way into the living room next door. He drew up a chair, sat down.

Pier and Teo followed.

Dr. Helder looked at Teo leaning in the doorway. "You like school?"

"Yeh. I guess so." Teo fumbled with his cap.

"What're you going to do with it?"

Teo glanced at Pier, looked down at his feet.

Dr. Helder said, "Now. Here. Don't pay no 'tention to your dad. Speak up."

"Well, Dad wants me to get interested in the farm. But, shucks, I dunno. I guess I'd kind a like to monkey around machines. Make 'em."

"Huh. Good. You're smarter than I thought. The age coming at us is going to be a buzzer age and you might just as well be right in the middle of it as not."

Pier, standing all the while at the head of the horsehair sofa, looked down. He turned his shoe on the floor. He pulled up his shoulder, rolled it beneath his outdoor jacket. He grumbled.

He heard Nertha stirring. Quickly he pushed Teo aside, looked in the bedroom.

She had just opened her eyes. They rolled. Her once green pupils were like little gray onions turning in dirty milk. They focused. She whispered, "Pier?"

Pier kneeled. "Yes, girl."

"I . . . feel so funny."

Pier took her hand, swallowed.

Dr. Helder stepped up behind Pier. "Feel better?"

Nertha looked at him. "Dr. Helder?"

Dr. Helder patted her hand. His grave eyes smiled at her. A muscle worked in his lean, gray cheek. "Sure, and now you'll be all right. Just a little too much work, woman." He shook his finger playfully at her. "I want you to take it easy for a couple of days."

Pier swallowed again. "Want me to get Edna, girl? Somebody?"

She looked at Dr. Helder. "I can't work?"

"Nosirree! Not one stroke. I want you to rest."

Nertha looked weakly at Pier. "Kin we afford it?"

Dr. Helder bristled. "Afford it? What you want to ask is, can you afford to die? Look, woman, you're a sick woman. Real sick. And I want you to take it easy for a couple of days. A week if possible." He paused. "You know, Mrs. Frixen, now that I'm here, I think I'll give you an all-around checkup. Just to make sure." He glanced at Pier and Teo. "I'll see you two afterwards."

Pier was pacing back and forth on the new kitchen linoleum, measuring his shoes against the green-yellow blocks, and Teo had left for the barn again, when Dr. Helder appeared.

"She bad?" Pier asked, lifting red-gray brows.

"Not very." Dr. Helder sat down. "Got an extra cup of tea?"

"Sure thing, Doc." Pier hastened to get a clean cup. He poured out a cupful from the glazed, black teapot, put the pot under the tea cozy again.

Dr. Helder slowly shook his head. "How that woman stayed alive all these years is beyond me."

"Huh?"

"Pier, did she ever complain of being constipated?"

"Well, not much, that I remember. She never talked about them things."

"Uh-huh. Well, Pier, as near as I can make out, she's got a twisted bowel. A hooked bowel. Yessir. As soon as she's strong enough, we'll get an X ray. And if it is what I think it is, out it comes."

"Put her under the knife?"

"Yes."

Pier said, pouring himself another cup of tea too, his third, "Well, I did notice she was slow sometimes. Kind a mixed up, crabby-like."

Dr. Helder snorted. "You farmers! We doctors might just as well hang out a mortician's shingle, for all the good we do. Can't you thickheaded fools ever get it in your heads that when you don't feel good you got to call a doctor? You call the veterinarian, don't you, when your cows get sick?"

Pier stirred the sugar in his tea slowly. He said nothing.

"Or do you?"

Pier mumbled.

"Huh? Huh?" Dr. Helder rattled his cup noisily.

"Yeh. I guess so."

Dr. Helder finished his tea hurriedly, stood up. He pulled at a gold chain hanging across his vest, looked at his watch. "Well, I got a dozen calls to make yet today. Now. I left a box of pills on the dresser in there. Give her one before each meal. With a glass of water. And don't let her get up."

"She'll be all right though?"

"She'll be fine if you give her a chance."

"An' she won't lose the boy?"

"Let's hope not." Dr. Helder drew on his gloves, slapped his hands together, knitted his gray brows over gray eyes and then, nodding stiffly, stepped outside. In a moment he left the yard.

But Nertha did not improve. She lay listlessly in her bed.

One night a fit of hiccups awoke her. They continued for the next two days and nights.

On the morning of the third day Pier couldn't stand it any longer. He called Dr. Helder again, was told to get a new box of pills.

Then for a week she seemed to pick up. She smiled some days. She even got up for meals. She watered the flowers: the Wandering Jew, the geraniums, the begonias.

But the next Sunday another fit of hiccups seized her. It lasted four days. And once again only powerful pills could knock her out of it.

So through all the month of June, Nertha wrestled with recurring hiccups. She thinned. By mid-July she was too weak to walk. Her eyes swam in their sockets like sick fish in stale water. Knee and elbow joints bulked large. Bowel movements came irregularly. One day her heart beat swiftly, raising red roses to her cheeks; the next, slowed to a flutter, leaving her pale and sickly green.

Prostrate, weakening, she lay in her bed. Steadily the shaking hiccups leveled her body. The mound of her belly sank a hand's width below the line of her bony chest. Her nose jutted out of the pillow. Her legs were bones. Her fleshes became flaccid.

Once her body drew itself up into a swelling breath; then exploded a loud sneeze. Her face calmed a little.

With Nertha wasting away in the house and the crops slowly burning to a crisp in the fields, Pier felt himself slipping off toward the edge of the gray deeps.

Waking in the morning was a torture. To bring himself to his feet he had to reconvince himself each gray, dusty dawn that there was something left to live for. And once up and moving, he growled all day long. He cursed the animals. He cursed the machines. He cursed Teo; once even beat the boy with calloused, pummeling fists.

Edna came to help with the housework for a few days, but left in a huff when Pier complained about her housekeeping ways, when he talked rough, when he cursed her.

Ma Lysbeth stayed with him but two hours. When she left, bent, aged, shaking a withered finger, she berated him bitterly for his surly, beastlike behavior.

Then Kaia came; Kaia with her tangerine handkerchief, her blue stones, her gypsy ways. Around her he managed to keep his temper, mainly because she knew how to handle his moods. And though she was slovenly in her ways—left mop rags lying openly on the floor under the sink, washed dishes with soiled dishrags, licked her fingers when she cooked, forgot to wash her hands when she handled butter and bread—Pier was willing to accept her because he found it a comfort to have a gay, whole woman in the house again. He liked her flashing black eyes, her still young gestures, her ripe Indian-brown arms. He remembered that she had always been jolly. She had been the first in the village to flaunt bobbed hair, first to wear short skirts, first to wear the seductive low waist.

But, after two weeks, she too had to leave. Her brother Stephan ailed. He had been found lying amongst his beloved barnyard cattle with a high fever.

Neighbors came to pay their respects. Some came to gossip, some to weep.

One day even Old Dad Roel came. A neighbor brought him. He couldn't walk much any more. He had become a stiff awkward rectangle of bones.

A forenoon, just as Pier was coming out of the hot tool shed with a pail he had soldered, Blacktail drove on the yard in his new blue Buick. He braked up by the woodshed.

Pier set down the pail. He stared. Had Peter Puddicombe, son of the Earl of Kancastra, Blacktail, the man from whom he had wrested Red Joe's farm, come to sympathize too? Pier stepped slowly toward the car.

Blacktail opened the door, crawled out. Dressed in neat gray trousers, well shaved, his black bow tie correctly squared, his mustache trim as a domino, he came slowly toward Pier.

"'Lo, Frixen."

"Hi."

"How goes it?"

"Good. Can't complain."

"How's the wife?"

"Oh, all right."

"I hear she's been ailing."

"Yeh."

"Too bad."

"Yeh." Pier searched his pockets for a plug of tobacco. Finding it, he offered Blacktail a bite, was refused, bit off a healthy chew for himself. The sweet nicotine stung his tongue, in a moment stimulated his salivary glands into flowing. "Yeh."

Blacktail sniffed, lifted his mustache a little, said, "Well, Frixen, I came around to ask if you're going to seal your corn this summer."

"Oh." So that was what the rascal had come for. Pier smiled to himself.

"Well?"

"Corn? What corn?" Pier waved his hands at the barren, drought-rustling little fifty north of the grove.

"What's wrong with it? Looks good to me."

"Look at it again, man."

"It'll pull through if we get rain."

"If."

Blacktail flicked his eyes. "Look, I didn't come to argue with you

about the weather. I came to find out if you're sealing this year. Like all the other farmers."

"Mister, don't tell me you're actually worryin' about me!"

"Frixen, I don't give a damn about you. I'm only doing my job. I sign you farmers up for the corn-sealing program, put a guv'ment seal on your crop when you get it in this coming fall."

"Oh."

"Frixen, it'll be worth your time. The guv'ment'll pay you forty-five cents to the bushel if you do."

"Ha! Pay me forty-five cents a bushel when the market's only offerin' a nickel . . . man, are you nuts?"

Blacktail pulled a single cigarette out of a pack in his shirt pocket. "The idea is to hold your corn until a better price comes along. In the meantime, the guv'ment helps you pay your rent debts, so on. Later, when the price does go over forty-five, the guv'ment gets paid back what they give you, and you get the difference."

Pier stared at the other. "Blacktail, tell me, ain't there just one pie around here where you ain't got yer finger in?"

Blacktail smiled.

"Man, your soul must be made a wild yeast to be such a busybody."

"It's the same yeast everybody else uses to raise dough, to make a living, to get on."

Pier shook his head. "Man, ye're hauntin' us farmers like the Âlde Han, stickin' yer nose in all our affairs." Pier remembered the day Blacktail had taken the gun away from him. He reddened, remembering the shame of it. "Someday, mister, you'll learn better."

Blacktail puffed slowly on his white cigarette. "Frixen, you don't understand. What you do don't make a particle of difference to me, except that I'd like to get back what you owe me. That's why I'd like to see you make some money. A little. You see, I'd rather skin you alive than dead."

Pier said nothing.

"Well, Frixen, what about it?"

"T'hell with you an' the guv'ment. T'hell. I don't need yer help."

"Now, Frixen——"

"An' get the hell off'n my yard."

"Say now!"

"Get. I got enough worries without you addin' to it. My wife

dyin', my second boy chokin', my land flyin', my crops goin' . . . get the hell off!"

Pier drove the horses hurriedly, trying to save the few acres of oats in the big fifty that, despite the flaming drought, had managed to mature near the woodshed. He was cutting it down with the grass mower, intending to rake it up later as hay. The sun stabbed shafts of fire straight into the rash-red earth.

The twelve o'clock siren shrieked up from Starum way.

Just then, Teo appeared in the doorway of the porch, wildly waving his hands.

Pier hauled back on the lines. The rattling mower ground to a stop. The sickle whispered, quieted. "What's up?"

"It's come again. Her fits!"

From the look on Teo's face Pier knew the worst. With trembling fingers he hitched the horses to a post, vaulted the fence, lumbered across the barren yard. He banged through the screen doors and rumbled across the groaning floor of the living room. He entered the bedroom, leaned over her. "Nertha?"

She heard him. Weakly she opened her eyes. She moved her lips. Her voice guggled in her throat.

Then a vast rattle heaved her. Her face became pale gray-purple, and her swollen tongue slipped like a greasy wiener to the corner of her raggy, rectangular mouth. Against the white bed sheet the pink embroidery on her nightgown looked red.

Pier fell to his knees, gripping her, shaking her, crying, "Nertha girl!" His voice craked. "Girl! Stay here!"

Teo tore at his shoulder. "Don't hurt her, you crazy fool!"

Pier swung a furious arm at his son, knocking him down against the mop board beside the dresser.

Teo lay stunned.

"Nertha girl!" Pier shook her violently. Her head rolled like a loose, hollow pumpkin on the pillow.

Pier jumped to his feet. "Call Dr. Helder. Get! March! Hurry!"

Teo groaned, swallowed, tried to catch his breath again. He grunted, "I did."

"Call him! Call . . . huh?"

"I did, goddammit."

"Oh." Pier clutched the air. "Oh. Good boy." He snapped his mouth to.

Teo got slowly to his feet. Wrath contorted his boy's face. " 'Good boy' my ass. Why didn't you kill me too while you were at it?"

Pier whirled. "What!" His eyes swirled wildly. "What?"

Teo loomed near, seemed taller than he. The boy waved a clumsy, powerful arm. "You heard me."

Pier stepped back, suddenly afraid of what the boy's great coarse fists, doubling and working near his face, might do. He coughed, said quickly, "Soan, I deman' respect."

" 'Respect' my ass."

"Who speaks of killin'?"

"I do. The way you treat her, the way you act, is enough to give a dog's ass the heartburn."

Pier gathered up all his strength, tried to keep his whirling mind level, tried to keep the blood out of his eyes. "Soan, I deman' respect. Shut up. Or so help me God I'll strike you."

"Go ahead strike me. I dare y'u. You ain't the only king bee around here."

A groan sounded up from Nertha.

Both snapped to, leaned over her.

Her eyes slowly uncrossed. A warming color stirred in her pallid cheeks.

Pier held her in his arms.

Teo took her hand.

"God, there must be some way to save her." Pier's mind darted like a pack of wild rabbits. There must be. He had outwitted the Âlde Han on the barn, on the windmill. There must be.

He passed his hand over the back of his neck to brush away the feeling that a breath was stirring in the fuzzing red-gray hair there.

He turned to Teo. He wanted the boy out of the way so he could think clearly. He said, "Better put the horses in. Won't have no use for them today no more."

Teo mumbled.

"I said, 'Put the——' "

Teo snapped, "I know. I heard you the first time."

Pier faced the boy determinedly. "Boy, do you think it's proper to fight with your father at your dying mother's bedside?"

Teo growled, threw him a vindictive glance, stalked out.

Pier sighed.

Nertha's gray-yellow hand hung over the edge of the bed. He pushed it under the sheet. He felt her brow, found it hot.

He went to the kitchen to get a cold pack. He cooled her with it. He drew up a chair and stroked her thin legs through the sheet. He busied himself to make her comfortable. He tended her.

A few minutes later, a hiccup shook her. Another.

The hiccups possessed her again. They started slowly, irregularly. Soon they came faster, ever more frequent, ever and more regular.

Nertha opened her eyes, turned on the pillow. "Pier?"

"Yes, girl."

"What"—*hic*—"time is it?" *Hic.*

"Oh . . ." He looked at the alarm clock on the dark mahogany dresser. "A little after twelve."

Her hands moved beneath the sheets. *Hic.* "Got a handkerchief?"

"Sure." He jumped up to get one. "Here you are."

She tried to lift her hand to take it, but couldn't.

"Here. I'll hold it." He held the flimsy cloth over her thin, bony nose. "Blow now."

She did. Weakly.

"Feel better?"

"A little."

He took her hand, rubbed it.

"Where's"—*hic*—"Teo?"

"Unhitchin' the horses from the mower."

Her face clouded. "Mower?" *Hic.* "An' him so young?"

Pier stared at her. She was slipping back fast. "It's all right, Nertha. I'll tell him to leave it alone."

The hiccups came faster. *Hic.* They shook her. *Hic.* They leveled her. *Hic.*

Dr. Helder came at two o'clock.

Pier heard him come down the walk, heard him stop, heard him talk with Teo. Their voices were indistinct, came to him only as murmurings.

Then Dr. Helder, austere in a light gray summer suit, stepped into the house, entered the bedroom. His gold watch chain flashed on his vest. The room took on an incisive air. "Hiccups again, huh?"

"Yes, Doctor."

Nertha awakened. Her eyes rose slowly from the deeps. They focused. She smiled weakly. "Doc"—*hic*—"tor."

"Yes, Mrs. Frixen. It's all right. Lie still now." Dr. Helder smiled waxenly. He took her pulse, studied her. He seemed to be nodding to himself in his mind.

Nertha's lips moved. The first word was lost. ". . . time is it?" *Hic.*

Dr. Helder looked quickly at Pier, at her.

Pier looked at the alarm clock. "About two-thirty."

She nodded. She played with her handkerchief, folding it, unfolding it.

Dr. Helder motioned to Pier, stepped out of the bedroom.

Pier followed him into the kitchen. The bright green-yellow linoleum floor was a welcome relief after the dark, shadowy corners of the bedroom. Pier wiped sweat from his brow and rolled up his shirt sleeves another turn. "Well?"

"There's not much I can do, Frixen."

"Not, huh?"

"No. Pills won't do it. Nor the needle. Her body's got used to drugs. I don't know." Dr. Helder's gray eyes were troubled and smoky.

"Oh wal, Doc, she's probably only gettin' worse to get better."

"Ha!"

"She won't die?"

Dr. Helder fumbled his gold watch chain. He skipped-the-rope with it against his vest. "I'm afraid you better set yourself for the worst."

Pier blinked, would not believe it. "You mean I got to fix for it?"

"Yes. And, Frixen, tell your boy. Now mind. Tell him the truth."

Pier nodded, staring the floor.

"Well, I got a dozen other calls to make. I'll come around later."

Again Pier nodded.

The doctor left.

Pier tended her with wrinkling eyes. He sat beside her on the bed, holding her hand.

The hiccup in her belly was an invisible hand rocking her bed, shaking it. It broke her breathing, broke her words, broke her glances.

She folded and unfolded and refolded the handkerchief, neatly, exactly.

Every little while she asked again, "Pier, what"—*hic*—"time is it?"

Pier closed his eyes, remembered old gramma lore. Dying people always asked for the time.

He shook his head. Fiercely he told himself it wasn't true.

The hiccing of her body had almost caught up with the ticking of the alarm clock. *Hic*. Ke-tick. *Hic*. Ke-tick. Ke-tick. *Hic*.

Pier turned, looked blindly at the wall, hardly noting the elaborate flower designs in the wallpaper. In his mind he went back over their days together.

He recalled the first evening she came. She had bit her lips when she found Âlde Romke and Ma Lysbeth still in the downstairs bedroom. The very next morning she moved them upstairs, brought her own things down. In a week she had the old bedroom gay, bright, alive, had made it his and hers, had made him feel a man and an equal to Âlde Romke.

He remembered how she had insisted on coffee for the morning drink.

He recalled her virgin limbs, her peach-round breasts, her eyes as green as fields.

He nodded. She had been a good wife. She had given him Teo. And years of work.

He remembered the night Teo was born. His eyes lighted.

He looked at her thinning belly, wondered if the second unborn boy was already dead.

"Pier," she whispered, "what time is it?" *Hic*.

"About four, girl."

Hic. "It takes so long." *Hic*.

Ke-tick. The alarm clock stirred on the dresser. Ke-tick.

Pier tightened, bristled. Guilty thoughts needled him. "Aw, now, girl, please don't say that."

She sighed profoundly. *Hic*. Again she whispered, "It takes so long."

The hiccups came stronger, oftener.

Pier sat beside her, holding her hand, rubbing it. He waited. His mind drifted off, came back.

He gave her pills. He washed her hands and feet with water.

He brought her gruel, cleaned her when she vomited.

Like a slow, twisting, tightening knot, guilt closed around his mind. Impulses to think happy thoughts struggled in the closing coil.

"What time is it?"

"Five, I guess. Yeh."

She stirred feebly on her pillow.

Pier caught himself staring at the rocking, pregnant mound in her flat belly; looked away, embarrassed.

Nertha went slowly. Her green eyes darkened to gray-blue. Her limbs became flabby and stringy, her thighs a prostrate arch of bones.

All afternoon, all evening, all night long Pier tended her.

Teo finished the grain cutting, did the chores, made supper, washed the dishes, went to bed at eleven.

Pier watched her going. He felt himself thinning too. His whitening red hair lay tangled over his brow. His gray-red beard grew coarse.

At five in the morning a change came over her. She brightened. Even her hiccups slowed. Her eyes opened. She sat up a little in her white pillows. "What time is it, Pier?"

"Five."

"In the mornin'?"

"Yeh."

She nodded. Her soggy onion eyes lighted. A smile brushed over her lips. She laid her handkerchief aside. "It's here now, Pier."

Pier stiffened. "What kind of talk is that now?"

"Yes." She nodded. She looked to one side as if speaking to someone.

Pier's mind rushed to say something, to cover it up. "How'd you like some hot milk or somethin', huh?"

"Yes." Still she looked to one side, as if seeing someone.

Pier, shivering, ran to get the milk.

She sipped it slowly, apparently surprised that he had meant it. She looked up. "Where's your cup?"

"My . . . my cup?"

"Yes. Have a cup a tea with me."

He ran to get a cup and saucer, poured in cold water, sat beside her, pretending he was drinking something steaming hot. He blew on it. He bibbered with her.

Her eyes opened strangely. A shudder, beginning at her hips, ran

up under the skin of her belly. It ran like an animal trying to escape from beneath a blanket. "Pier!" she suddenly whispered, loud. "Pier!" She fell, the glass of milk slipping out of her hand, falling on her flat breast, spilling whitely over the sheet and on her pink-trimmed nightgown.

With a clatter Pier set his cup and saucer on the floor. He reached for her. He shook her. The sheets slid down. A sharp salty smell arose.

Pier drew back. Stared.

He hurled back the bedclothes. He whitened. Spreading over the bed crept crimson blood. Between her legs lay something resembling a pair of pig's feet bound up in a ball.

Pier's eyes swept her body. Where once a lovely hill had lifted her belly, a gully now opened. The weary body had thrown its son-burden.

He ran for the stair door. "Teo!"

But it was too late. By the time Pier came back to her, with pulsing Teo beside him, her soul was receding from her fleshes like a handful of water sinking away into sand. In a moment, her face became composed, was like a little girl's again, thin.

For a second Pier stood still.

Then he sprang up. Leaped. He bungled himself through the door, ran outdoors. He ran to the cornfield. He kicked and stumbled along, falling, getting up, beseeching the pinking skies of dawn. Deliberately he brushed himself against hard objects, against the harsh leaves of the cornstalks. He punished himself willfully.

He ran back to the yard. He saw an ax sticking up in the chopping block. He seized it, began furiously to chop wood.

Teo came up. "Dad, shall I——"

"Don't talk to me don't talk to me!"

"But, Dad——"

"Don't talk to me don't talk to me!"

"But, really, Dad, we——"

"Get out of here before I kill you too!" Pier roared, swinging the glittering ax through the air. He drew great breaths, cried, "Don't talk to me!"

"But——"

"Get away!"

Teo stared at him, turned, shrugged, went back to the house.

Pier tore into two clumps of wood that he had tried to split all last winter. His ax swung, rang, exploded splinters.

He paused, breathing hoarsely. His eyes fastened on the flashing blade. He lifted the ax, felt of its heft. How easily it could pop open a skull.

Nertha seemed to think it was hard dying. She was wrong. Death was easy, had always been easy, had always been breathing on his neck.

He dropped the ax into the wood. Could death come now, now, at this minute, it would end all sorrows, erase all hurt, cut guilt from the heart, blast the heart to hell.

He stumbled into the corncrib, his finger tips and toe tips numb. He banged into the snath of a scythe hanging from a beam above. His eyes cleared. He stared at it. He half expected to see Father Time standing beside it, holding the crook-handled blade, beckoning him to come.

Blood beat in his head. Sparks skittered in his eyes. He leaned against the crib slats.

He clutched his breast. Guilt seared him. It was a burning bush in his body. A furiously growing, choking plant.

Swing the snath. Cut the shoot with scythe. Kill it. Keep the root from breath.

Dr. Helder came on the yard, appeared in the doorway of the crib. "Pier man! Take it easy."

"But, Doc, I feel so guilty. Guilty."

"About what?"

"I ruined her. I worked her too hard. I worked her down to a bone."

"Come now. Here. What's done is done."

"I broke her. I bred her. I never gave her fun."

"Now."

"Doc, you don't understand. I can't tell it you. How I feel, I mean. About feelin' so . . . guilty. It's . . . oh, I can't tell it you."

"Now, here, take a pill. It'll cool you off."

"An' when I come to?"

"Take another."

Pier groaned. "No. No. Not that. Pills won't do it. They won't touch it. Can't."

"Sure they will. Here."

"No. It won't let them."

"Pier. After all, we must die sometime, you know."

Pier whirled away, afraid he would spill over. He stalked toward the barn. Death had smiled at him there that day he had fixed the cupola.

He entered the cow barn. Stepping in from the bright outdoors, it seemed preternaturally, sinisterly dark.

He climbed into the haymow. He stood puffing a moment, not knowing what to do. His head seemed to be full of boiling blood. His eyes still blurred. He blinked, trying to clear them.

A trip rope, hanging from above, tickled against his arm. He leaned on it.

He was seized with the wonderfully terrifying impulse to hang himself. His hands fashioned a loop in the rope, his hands threw the end of it over a crossbeam.

There was a noise below. A scrambling up the hay ladder. A door flew open near him. Light poured in upon him. He blinked.

"Dad?"

Pier stood stupidly.

"Dad? Say . . . hey, what the deuce are you doing up here? Hey!"

"Nothin'."

The boy loomed close up. "That rope . . ." The boy jerked it out of his hands. "Dad!"

"Nothin'."

"Dad."

Pier looked down at the dusty straw on the haymow floor. Dizzy, he turned a little on his feet.

Teo said, his voice level, piercing, "So, you really got it that bad, huh?"

"Huh?"

"Dad, did you ever give a think to the idea that maybe I could feel bad about life too? Just like you?"

Pier looked up. The boy's Nertha-green eyes probed into him steadily. "You?"

"Yes, me."

"Son, you got your whole life ahead a you yit. But me, I got nothin' ahead. Nothin'. I'm a failure an' I'm findin' it out at the end."

"That ain't the way Dr. Helder figures it."

"Him?"

"Yes. He was sayin' to me just now that I'm the one who's really got hell ahead. As long as Ma was alive, she saw to it that I went to school. But now . . . I can just see it comin'."

Pier fired. He balled his fist. An upper dogtooth began to ache suddenly. Pier could feel the rise and fall of each heartbeat in it. "That devil. What's our family any of his business?"

"Yessir, it'll be plain hell for me from here on in," Teo said again.

A thought pushed aside the red pain in Pier's head. "Son, are we racin' to see who's hurt the most?"

Teo stepped back a little, taken by surprise. He muttered.

"What?"

Teo swallowed.

For a second, to have silenced the boy, Pier felt better. He began to climb down the hay ladder.

"I suppose we better start callin' people," Teo said, following him "Grampa Andringa. Shouldn't he be called first? He'd want to know."

Pier's thoughts scattered apart like startled pigeons, flew together again in dipping flight. "Oh, that's right. He's her next a kin. You go call him right away."

"But he ain't got no phone. That's what I was gonna tell you. That we oughta drive over."

Pier stepped out on the yard again. "Wal, that's right too."

Teo looked at him a moment. "You gonna do it? Or must I?"

Pier hit his forehead with the flat of his hand. "I'll do it. That'll give me something to do."

Teo pushed back his cap. "Go ahead. Drive over. I'll try to do what's right here. Go ahead. Hurry. Get Grampa."

Shep, the little golden-haired puppy, came up, reached up to lick Pier's hand. Pier reached down, patted it, went on.

Pier backed out the car, whirled the steering wheel, stopped, shifted gears, started up. With a wrench, he drove the old Buick up the lane, ground over the uneven dust-drifted tracks, swung east to climb the rise.

A ravenous hunger for a chew awoke in him. He pulled out his plug of tobacco. As he did so he remembered that Nertha had always hated the dirty habit. With sudden resolve he swore he would never

chew again. He hurled the plug out of the car window as far as he could throw it.

He nodded his head. He would return to his corncob pipe again, one of the best friends he had ever had. Ae. Return. Go back. Bring back at least a part of the good old days.

The sun was just coming up. The wracked, dust-drifted earth lay dead beneath its shining.

Sixteen years ago he had driven along this same road, whistling happily on his way to marry Nertha. Now he was going to tell of her death.

The heavy green Buick caromed through Starum, the lean tires catching a citizen's chicken, and crushing it in an explosion of feathers. The steering wheel joggled in his hand.

He climbed the long slope toward Two-Bits. Crowds of dark-pupiled sunflowers along the roadside looked menacingly at him, like one-eyed cobras. He passed Jasper Pool, its cool waters green against the red rocks.

He hurled the car down the slow valleys between Squaw Tit and Sometimes. Here, the Old Dreamer had said, unthinkable ages ago the glacier ice had plowed through the prairie like icebergs going through the Atlantic Ocean.

Ten miles to the east, where the border of Minnesota came down from the north, he saw the church steeples of Hazard, Minnesota. To the west, a succession of strange new wave-high dust drifts and wide shallow hollows lifted and lowered the surface of the prairies.

He climbed the fat bluffs south of Dell Valley. To his left gleamed the pale purple rocks of the Palisades. The morning sun, fingering the dew-bright rocks, flickered on the spun-smooth waters.

He descended into Dell Valley. He drove through the narrow town. Two children, playing in the gray sand of the dust-drifted street, looked up, sucking their snot-running noses, rolling their wondering eyes at his speeding wheels. At a street crossing, an old man glanced up, tossing his white mane haughtily at the oncoming car, then lowering his head and scampering for the safety of the sidewalk. A storekeeper came out to lower a faded tan sunshade against the rising light.

Pier dreaded the coming talk with the gentle old man. It would be like hitting a raw, skinned face with a maul.

He parked the car by the wooden gate. He stepped to the door,

knocked. He waited. He looked around at the yard, remembering vividly the day he had bounded down the path hunting for Nertha. There was the seat swing, there the neatly painted privy, there the circle where flowers usually grew.

He waited. He cocked his ear for the sound of footsteps coming to the door. But none came.

A rustling to his right caught his ear. A neighbor lady was shaking out a dust mop.

He looked at her. She looked at him.

He scuffed a foot on the gray, wooden porch.

"You lookin' for Old Dad Roel?"

"Yeh."

"I think he went for a walk."

"Walk? Him? I thought he couldn't much any more " Pier looked to one side, ashamed to notice how eagerly his eyes had searched out the woman in her.

"Oh, he can still move around a little. At least enough to go for a morning walk. I think . . . Yes, I'm sure of it. He went that way. Toward the Gulch. It's where he says he can worship the wonders of God." She smiled. Her gray-blue eyes clouded up with a religious mist.

"Oh."

"Just walk out that way. You're sure to meet him."

"Thanks."

Pier stalked along the path. It wound north out of Dell Valley. Gaunt, dead sunflowers stood black in the dried terrain. A mass of green-gold flies festered in a puddle of fresh brown chicken dung.

The land lifted; fell a little. Before him lay the monster mouth of the Devil's Gulch. The flowing Split Rock waters slapped lazily against the piers of the railroad bridge on the left.

The pink-purple rocks looked like frozen lumps of human flesh. Like a mustache growing around the mouth of a dying man, sprouts of fresh green grass crowded over the edge of the Gulch. Blue-green cedars sparkled unnaturally in the dust-stived landscape. And miraculously, despite the burning of the brass-hot sun, luscious green fern fronds waved beneath the leafless scrub oak.

Pier looked to the right, looked to the left, saw no sign of the old man.

He stepped onto the footbridge spanning Jesse's Jump. He leaned

over the rusted iron railings, looked down. The oil-dark green waters wavered mysteriously inside the lowering Sioux quartzite gorge. He stared into the toothless mouth. Its great raw-red gums grinned horribly back up at him, seemed slowly to close around him.

A light breeze came up. It moaned in the narrowing caves. The dark blue-green waters, reflecting the bronze-blue sky above, turned beneath the underbite of the red snout like a thousand lapping tongues.

He nodded. Nertha was wrong. It was easy to die. Ae. Easy. Everywhere one looked the mouth of death faced one, open. Ae, it was easy.

The deeps fascinated him. He leaned forward.

He caught himself. He fumbled for his cut of chewing tobacco, remembered he had thrown it away.

It was easy. Ae. A man had merely to lean over a little, over the railing, and down he would go. Down. In. Gone.

He leaned over. Unconsciously his mouth aped the cunning, smiling mouth below.

It was so easy. A simple slip of the foot . . .

He felt himself sliding on the rusted railing. With widening, uncomprehending eyes he watched a rusty streak lengthening on his faded overall.

His foot slipped. With the railing as a fulcrum, he revolved slowly in the air. His legs were like the big hand of a clock, his arms the little.

He turned once. Twice. Twilight came up. The gorge closed over him. Down. Down. In.

He hit the water head first. He slipped neatly into the menacing oily waters. He sank.

The first way into the water was warm, as warm as the insides of a cow's womb.

Then cold water seized him, pinched him. He slipped downward. Dark waters overwhelmed him. He bumped against a jagged outthrust of greedy rock. Fires glistered in his skull.

There was a movement. A vast tongue, the undertow of a hidden, subterranean river, drew him down.

Suddenly he needed air. When he opened his mouth, water plunged, sloshed into his throat. He clamped up tight.

He wrestled. He threw out his arms. They moved slowly in the

deep heavy water. He coughed. Guggled. He opened his eyes, saw the dim wavering outlines of the Great Mouth closing its darkness over him. He made a mighty effort to raise himself up through the water. The great watery womb had become a grave. The dark rocks and black waters seemed fearfully inhuman to him. They were so vast a titanic terror he could not relate it to anything he had ever seen or dreamt. His mind would not touch it.

He found it hard to die.

He threshed out blindly. He fought. He wriggled against the dark, deadly undertow. His mind became a kettle simmering with escaping fear. Huge yellow-red fires burst open in his eyes. He cried. He choked. All the frozen-flesh rocks of the world seemed to be holding him down. The stiff water bound his hands.

Then his head shot clear of the water. He threshed the air, threw up a high arm, gulped gallons of fresh air. The hot summery air of July was as sweet as rain water.

The rocks towered above him, steep.

He flailed his long arms, churning the water. He cursed himself for not having learned to swim well in his youth. He splashed. He was a spastic crab throwing out wild limbs. He hurried to get to the side before the gigantic red-rock mouth closed over him again.

Before him rose the Devil's Stairway, its irregular cracks and flat platform slabs of rock leading to the prairie above. With fright-powered effort Pier heaved himself out of the water, gained the first ledge. He scrambled upward. His heart thumped. He climbed up the stairway, grabbing onto cedar roots, fern stems, flat rocks. He rushed out of the abyss, out of the maw of eternity.

The Alde Han had let him slip out of His grasp again.

He was cold when he knocked on Old Dad Roel's door again. He shivered. His overall and shirt and shoes and underwear were waterlogged, were soaked deep dark blue.

The door opened.

"Hi."

"Why . . . Pier! My son. Come in." Old Dad Roel thrust out a thin, old hand. He nodded his lean gray head excitedly.

Pier stepped in.

"Have a chair, son." The flustered old man hurried to pull up a rocker. His bony steps itched across the floor. He was bent.

Pier sat down. "Thanks."

"Pier! Ye're as wet as a muskrat."

"Wal, I ain't exzactly a dry wind."

"Here, put on a clean overall. This one. It's an old one of mine. Probably small, but at least it's dry."

Pier turned modestly to one side, slid out of his wet clothes, drew on the dry overall.

The old man hung up the wet clothes on the porch, came in again. "What happened, son?"

"Oh . . . I was takin' a little walk. Huntin' for you. Neighbor lady said you'd gone down that way. An' I happened to slip into a puddle a water."

"Oh. Too bad."

Pier said, "I came to tell you bad news, Dad."

"Oh?"

Pier steeled himself. "Yeh. You see, Nertha, she died this mornin'."

"Oh." Instantly the old man sat down. "Oh." He stood up again, began to tinker with the lids of the kitchen stove.

They were silent together.

"Well," the old man said, "well"—he fiddled with the coffeepot—"say, Pier, would you like a cup a coffee?"

"That would go mighty fine. Hit the spot."

Tears appeared in the old man's eyes. With a child's look he gazed out of the window, nodding his head at the empty land.

4. A ROOSTER, A HEN, A DOUGHNUT

. I .

IN EARLY NOVEMBER THE HIGHWAY constructors came. They drove a graded dirt road straight west from Rock Falls. With dusty, orange-red caterpillar tractors and long-bladed graders they knocked down fences, piled long strips from the fields onto the roadbed, leveled hills, raised valleys.

They tore up the road running past Red Joe's, came down the rise past Pier's farm. They ripped out long black slices of the Grimovich pastureland across the road.

From there they curved the new way southwest. They skirted the edge of the Grimovich ranch, boxed in the Brandt boys, turned south to a cutoff near Canton, South Dakota. They cut ditches four

to ten feet deep. They overturned old stones, and buffalo bones, and Indian skulls. They upset an old Mound Builder's home, spilling out flakes of pottery, sacred fetishes, rows of stones, and flint ceremonial knives, exposing the ashes of an ancient life to the rust of the air. They opened up gravel heads. They buried acres of fertile soil beneath tons of lifeless, toneless clay.

Then the Lion of the Great Alone, in a grave impersonal gesture, relaxed Its hold on the elements. Vast sheets of rain fell on the land.

At first the thirsty old earth couldn't get enough of the rains. She quaffed the showers as if they were only thimbles of water. Her want seemed unquenchable.

The wavering, drenching sheets of rain kept coming on, coming. And at last the old land became satiated. She closed her mouth.

Small trickles began to run. Little shoestring streams filled. Water scratched long thin fingers into the sides of the hills, opened up black bleeding wounds in the soil.

The fingering streams grew. They splashed into the new roadside ditches. They riffled. They gathered speed. They ruffled. They cut into the unhealed construction wounds. And slowly the wounds became cavernous ravines.

The deep gully east of the house filled with water again. For a few hours a dust drift dammed it up. But soon the soft dike gave way, and, with a rush, the headed waters crashed against the dust drift south of the house where once the crab apple stood. Quickly the waters raised, swelled up along the mound of flour-fine dust. It topped it. It scudded over, down the other side. The nesh dirt crumpled. In a few minutes, the driving waters swirled the mud away, spilled it into the Big Sioux Valley.

The Big Sioux swelled. It doubled its muscular currents. It carried the fine silt to the Missouri.

And the Missouri, already muddy, chocolate, once more became too thick to drink, too thin to plow.

The rains poured for a week.

The gully in the orchard widened, began to burrow under the foundations of Pier's house.

A mild week came, and the remaining soil became as mellow as corn meal. And the grass and the weeds and the flowers, all of them furious little pumps, suckled the old land for food and drink.

The orange-red rose berries flushed. The black-eyed Susans lifted brows of wan gold. The pink-frilled bull thistle pirouetted. The tickleweed and the milkweed fluffed. The gold-and-green moss on the purple-red quartzite once more took up its weary task of veiling the bared meat of the earth. The narrow-leaf knotweed squatted beneath the bearded ministerial wild rye. The evening primrose opened its many flowers. The white snakeroot reeked again. The wild four-o'clock shrugged its dainty shoulders. Five-fingers became haughty. The green wormweed shed thousands of seeds. The tumbling pigweed, and the winged pigweed, bounced over the countryside. The red-stemmed spotted spurge cowered low on the ground.

But underneath the faintly breathing lungs of the earth, the old bones were dry, the deep aorta ran sluggish; the veins, the old wells and underground streams, which had once pulsed in her spongy parenchyma, were as droughty as ever.

. 2 .

Pier was taking a bath on the porch after supper. It was dark.

His long body gleamed a pale white. He sudsed soap under his armpits, twirled the point of a soapy washrag into his navel, lifted his legs one at a time to clean the undersides. He scrubbed vigorously. It was good to be rid of the dirty feeling.

He thought of the farmers around who went without a bath from fall to spring. Men were pigs. Hogs. Manners and cleanliness were virtues a man should have the year round.

Through the drawn curtain he saw Teo moving around in the kitchen. Without half trying he could picture the boy's lonely face. Pier bit on his lips. With Teo looking more like Nertha every day, and insolently swinging his young shoulders at his talk, living with the boy was becoming a real ache.

Pier rinsed off the soap. He splashed. The water sprinkled merrily into the galvanized washtub beneath.

He heard a rustling on the roof. There was a sound as if the tiny feet of a caterpillar were racing over it. The scratching became sharper, sounded like the toes of a dozen sparrows ticking on the shingles.

He stilled his hands, held his breath, listened.

The ticking became a rattle.

His ears tightened.

Then a splatter of rain dinged the pane of the big bay window behind him, and he knew.

He swallowed. His gulping Adam's apple jumped. Rain? In November? He dropped the sponge on the floor, held his hand out of the door. Ae. Rain. Little pitpats of water were sprenting his hand. He smelled it. Ae. Rain.

He stepped onto the dark, dusty house yard. The warm drops falling in the womb-dark night tickled his skin. He lifted his arms. He turned and looked up. There were no stars. And into the shaft of mellow orange light pouring onto the yard out of the north kitchen window fell flashing fork-tine drops of rain.

He spread his legs. His bare toes turned slowly in the fluffy dust. He held up his palms to the black heavens.

The rain thickened. It rinsed his body. Soap and grit, and dingles of dirt, melted and vanished. His limbs began to shine in the night-dark.

Pier smiled. He shivered. He looked into the dark sky of the rain-full night. It was good to be washed clean by the sweet rain. He closed his eyes and stretched out his arms.

· 3 ·

The next morning, Pier awoke stiff and muscle-sore. And realized that never again could he toss young bull horns at rain and storm.

He lifted himself out of bed and staggered bent to the dresser mirror. He saw a long gaunt man of forty standing in gray underwear. The mirrored face had deep lines. His mouth was drawn at the corners. Fingers of worry reached from his ears to his eyes. There were still a few red hairs left in his mane and they gave its silver a golden tinge. His eye sockets were large, hollow. His lips were colorless, thin. Ae, he was an old man.

Placing his hand over the small of his back, he straightened up, groaning. He rubbed his noisy whiskers.

He turned to the lonesome bed. He looked to where Nertha used to stretch her slim length, and whirled hastily away.

His back twitched. Pain hammered in his arm and leg bones.

He rustled through the dresser for woolen winter underwear. Then slowly, almost solemnly, he dressed, drawing on his brown

woolen socks well up over the bottoms of the winter wear, throwing his shirt over his head, dropping his long legs into the milk-stiff pant legs of the overall.

He stepped to the kitchen, holding his side. He pushed a match up underneath the chimney of the pulldown lamp. He lighted a fire in the range. He drew on a jacket and sat down to wait for the room to warm. Presently, when the coffeepot began to murmur, he called Teo to bibber the morning cup with him.

All through choring he groaned, felt old.

At breakfast, just when he began to feel loosened up a little, to feel alive again, Teo opened up on him. The boy's face was flushed, his peach-young cheeks suffused. The boy said, "I'm gettin' damn tired of the same thing over and over. Ain't any fun eatin' no more."

Pier sighed, his spirits sagged. He hitched his armchair closer to the table. "Wal, boy, what is it now?"

"This oatmeal. One more breakfast of it and it'll pour out of my ears."

"Wal, boy, I just didn't feel up to makin' something special this mornin'."

"Special? As if we ever had anything special."

"Now, now."

"Well, it's the truth."

Pier sighed, lapsed into silence.

A car sounded outside. Pier glanced up. "I wonder who that kin be?"

Teo got to his feet, rolling a cigarette as he did so. Just after Nertha's funeral, the lad had begun to smoke. He looked out. "It's Blacktail."

Pier straightened. "Huh. What does that hollow-hearted devil want? Probably comin' to foreclose me."

"Is there danger of that?" Teo asked, turning.

"We're up to our ears in unpaid mortgage interests, believe you me."

Teo stood silently a moment; then said, "Well, maybe it's just as well. Then I can go do what I got in mind."

Pier stood up. "What's that?"

"Nothing."

Pier put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "What——?"

Teo whirled, shook him off. "Nothin'. You wouldn't understand anyway."

"Huh. You'd be surprised at what I kin understand."

Teo said nothing, looked sullenly at the floor.

"My boy——"

"Aw, leave me alone. You don't care if school keeps any more or not, so why talk." Teo stepped toward the door of the living room. "You better go see what Blacktail wants."

Pier's shoulders sagged. With a weary sigh, he drew on his outdoor clothes.

He stepped down the walk. The air was crisp. He wondered whether snow was in the offing. He approached the new Buick by the woodshed. "Hi."

" 'Lo there, Frixen. How goes it today?"

"Wal, I'm still holdin' the fort."

Blacktail looked over the yard, squinting. He smiled to himself.

Pier said, nodding, "I suppose ye're gettin' ready to move me out a here?"

"Maybe. Cattle still got enough feed?"

"No."

"Water?"

"I'm haulin' from the river."

"Why don't you get a permit to fence in some of that county land?"

Pier narrowed his eyes. "Ain't you the guy what tried to jail me fer usin' it once?"

"Illegally, sure. But you can use it legal, you know."

"For a price?"

"No. Free."

"Oh."

Blacktail glanced at the cattle yard. "Frixen, you surprise me. I've seen a lot of stock this fall, but none as good as yours."

"Uh-huh." Shep, the puppy, came waddling up, nosing his shoe tops, jumping up against his leg. "Down, Shep, down. Down now."

"Red Joe's, Brandt's, Grimovich's, Busch's, they all got skinny cattle. Most are selling to the guv'ment, or renting 'em out by usufruct to farmers in the East. Why, right next to you here, at Widow Kaia's, Stephan's, there's cows there that've got but a step left in their system. Triggs told me the other day he wouldn't take 'em for his rendering plant. But yours, Frixen . . . They're the best of the lot."

Pier studied the other. "Look mister. I'm not in the mood for speeches today. What's the catch? What's louse?"

Blacktail grinned. "And say, how are your chickens? Okay?"

"Hey, what's this? You assessor now too?"

Blacktail's quick eyes wicked. "No. No. It's just that I'm sizing you up to see if you're worth trusting for another year. You see, both your mortgages are due and I know you didn't make enough money this year to meet them."

Pier looked down. His back seemed to thicken even more with pain. "Wal, ye're right there."

Blacktail came a step nearer. "Frixen, you eating good?"

Pier's lips twisted. "Wal, to tell y'u the truth, I'm eatin' a little too little to live an' a little too much to die."

"What have you people been eating?"

It was a lot of crust for Blacktail to be asking such questions, Pier thought. He said, waving his hand over his soured, drifted land, "Sometimes I think I made a mistake when I didn't take the Old Dreamer's advice an' contour-farm it."

"Oh?"

"Yeh. That would a made it hard for creditors like you to find me."

Blacktail blinked, then laughed. "Frixen, you're a case, you are. I must admit, for all your dike-jumping dumbness, you're quite a man."

Pier grunted. "Wal, I'm sorry I can't return the compliment."

Blacktail's brows lifted in surprise. "Say, that's a pretty good comeback there." Blacktail brushed his mustache with a neat gray glove. "But come, we're getting nowhere fast. What are we going to do about those mortgages?"

"Wal, when must you have the bounce?" Ever since he had tried to pronounce for Nertha the printed word "balance," his unlettered mind making a leaping catch at the first and last letters, he had persisted in using it wrongly.

"Come, come, Frixen, you knew they were due today."

Pier lifted his silvering brows cagily. "What about sellin' you my Philosophy farm? The kid don't want it now anyhow."

"That would help. But I couldn't give you much for it. Not the way conditions are now."

Pier speared him with a piercing glance. "Say, what's got into you, Blacktail?"

"Why?"

"It sure sounds funny to hear you passin' out such favorable advice all of a sudden. You ain't joined a church? Or been elected deacon somewheres?"

Blacktail laughed softly. "No. As I told you before, I want to keep you on your feet. It's no fun minking if the mink is dead."

"Oh." Pier pushed his shoe around in the dust. He looked up again, wary. "You said something about renewin' the mortgage?"

"I did. Yes."

"Kin you give me two years more?"

"I can think about it."

"Really?"

"But I'm warning you. Two years from now, in '36, I've got to have it. A good share of my commitments are due then." Blacktail added, "You know, Pier, I've been of real service to you boys around here. My bank's the only one around for miles that didn't go broke."

"Huh. But Chauncey's did, an' before everybody else's. Which give you the power to put the squeeze to us. Put us in the anxious seat."

"Frixen, you sure are a case." Blacktail paused. "Well, all right. I'll make out the new papers and send them to you."

Pier shook a finger. "Remember, I ain't beggin' now. If you want to foreclose me, go right ahead."

"I know. I know. By the way, you got a cup of tea for an old bachelor like me? It's the only thing about you Frixens that makes you civilized."

"Tea?"

"Yes."

"Sure. I think maybe we kin find some tea leaves somewhere in this Godfersaken hole."

"Good."

"An' by the way, mister. You ain't the only bachelor around here. I'm a buck-nun now too, you know."

· 4 ·

The next day another car purred onto the yard. This time it was Pederson.

Pier stepped down the walk, pulling on his faded blue jacket and

sagging cap. A chilling wind was whipping across the eastern rise. Dust whirlwinded around the woodshed.

"Hi," Pier greeted. "What's up?"

Pederson stepped slowly out of his blue car. The ancient brushed off his pants, drew his brown suit jacket close, almost hiding his black bow tie and blue shirt. His wise, gray eyes lighted. "Hello, Frixen. You look like you got a backache."

"I have. A humdinger. Gettin' old, I guess."

Pederson pushed his tan cap back on his forehead. "Well, we all got to get old sometime. Can't stay young forever."

"That's right."

Pederson nodded; then, scratching his nose, became serious. He scratched a mark on the gray, dusty ground with his brown shoe. "Frixen, you busy today?"

"Not specially. Why?"

"Oh . . . I got a bad job to do and I need help. Fact is, I need the help of a certain kind of man."

"Oh?" Pier straightened momentarily. His eyes crinked up.

"Yeh. It's the Widow Kaia. She needs some help."

"Uh-huh."

Pederson's gentle, watchful eyes searched Pier. "It's an act of mercy, really, what I want to do. You know how her cattle's been starving? And her horses? No water, no grass, no hay, no nothing. Poor Stephan, he's going crazy seeing his animals die."

"I know. Blacktail told me."

"And Stephan"—the Old Dreamer shook his head—"and Stephan, you know how it is with him. He ain't any smarter than his animals. Oh sure, Stephan is a kind man. But his kindness is a kind of cruelty."

"Wal, what are we supposed to do?"

"Pier, I think we ought to go see Kaia, and tell her to order her brother to sell them cows. Or else usufruct them to some farmer up East. Something's got to be done." The old man rubbed his chin. "I thought if you could borrow Red Joe's truck, we could go in there and bring them away. What do you say?"

Pier's mind whirled over. She had to have help. Ac. Besides, he was now free to see her as much as he wanted. "It's okay by me. But what about the law?"

"Well, of course, we have to get her consent."

"Good. I've got to swill the hogs yit, an' then we kin go."

They rolled up to Kaia's in Red Joe's old truck, turned down the lane, the truck edges brushing the bare-limbed lilac bushes and chokecherry trees to either side.

Pederson led the way to the kitchen door. Dead geranium stalks bordered the crude plank walk. Old cardboard boxes, arms of machinery, two-fingered staples, rusted nails, lay scattered over the clay-yellow yard.

Pier kicked at the earth. "Ain't no wonder they're starvin' here. Look at the gravel in it too yit. Sure is poorly."

"That it is." Pederson pointed. "This is an outcrop of sand and clay here. Like your Red Bluff there."

Pier nodded. He glanced at a dead chicken crawling with maggots. Its feathers lay spewed to one side.

Pederson knocked on the gray, wind-worn door.

There was a movement at the window. The stirring curtain reminded Pier of the Commerce Street houses near the Sioux Falls junk yard. A moment later the door opened, and Indian-slim Kaia stood on the threshold, smiling, her white teeth as clean as milk, her face, despite its grease, blooming and rosy. For a woman near forty she looked surprisingly youthful. She wore a dirty tangerine shawl over her head. She greeted, her gold earrings tinkling, "Why, Pier. Come in. I . . . but oh, my house ain't fit for no company. I've been busy baking."

They entered. There was a smell of fresh, crust-buttered bread.

Pederson said kindly, "Now we don't want you to make any fuss, Kaia. We ain't going to stay but a minute."

"Well . . ." Her black mink eyes searched first one face, then the other. "You'll just have to take it as it comes then." She pushed forward two red-painted chairs. Then, leaning over the fuel box, she filled the stove with a scoop of cow chips.

Both Pier and Pederson sat down.

She turned. "I suppose you men would like a cup a coffee though?"

"That would be fine," Pederson nodded.

She bustled about the stove.

Bird song suddenly burst around them. For the first time Pier noticed a dozen bird cages hanging from the ceiling near the windows facing the yard. Beneath them spread a long unpainted flower box filled with begonias and African violets. Pier watched one of the canaries swing on its perch. "He sounds nice," he offered.

"Yes. You like birds?"

"A little."

"Yes, Dickie he can sing all right."

Pier stood up to look at the creature. Knots of music throbbed in its throat. He recalled the operetta, *The Countess Maritza*, he had seen. The yellow trembling throat, Kaia, the operetta, all seemed one. He watched the yellow creature a moment longer, then, turning, and crunching his heels on hardened bird dung lying on the floor, resettled on his chair, crossing his legs and hooking his cap over his knees.

"Yes," Pederson said, nodding, "yes, those birds are a comfort."

"I wouldn't know what I would do without 'em," Kaia said, setting out three hand-painted cups and saucers. She filled a creamer and sugar and set them on the table too.

"Just like a phonograph," Pier offered.

"That's right."

"Or the radio that Teo's thinkin' a gettin'."

Kaia shook her head. "I don't think I'd like a radio. Too much talk. D'ruther have one of my birds singing. There ain't a minute but what one of 'em is singin' his head off." Her moccasin slippers sluffed on the floor as she moved from stove to pantry to table.

The strange house with its sharp contrast of dirt and bright colors disturbed Pier. He recalled that Âlde Romke had called her a hex, a gypsy, a seguener, and he looked around for evidences of it. He glanced at the fluttering, yodeling birds, at the bright red curtains, at her swift silent movements. He remembered the bright yellow morning when, on his way to marry Nertha at Dell Valley, he had seen Blacktail leaving her house after a night of tomcatting. A little sadly, he looked down at the floor.

A cockroach skittered on the floor near the kitchen sink.

The coffee began to perk, and in a few moments, smelling sweet and rich, she poured it out. She sat down with them, passed the creamer and sugar and cake.

The warming brew brightened Pier. The cake, heavy with raisins, was tasty too.

Pederson set his cup aside, and coughed. "I suppose you've been wondering what we come for?"

She set her cup back in its saucer, her blue stone rings clinking. "Well, yes."

Pederson coughed again. "As you've probably guessed, it's no disgrace to be hard up these days."

She laughed.

"So I hope you won't feel hurt when I say we've come to help you. Your cattle and horses, you're having a hard time with them?"

"I don't know."

Pederson's eyes became cautious. "You don't know?"

"No, I ain't got nothin' to do with the stock. That's been Stephan's job ever since my old man died."

"Oh."

"You'll have to talk to him."

Pier asked, "He in the barn?"

"I guess so. I never know."

"What?"

Kaia laughed and tinkled her rings. She raised a slim arm and two shining brass bracelets. "As you know, Stephan an' I don't get on so well. He's too dirty to be let in the house. Too dirty. So I've told him he can't come in. And he hates women. So he sleeps out in the barn with the cows."

"Where's he eat?"

"I set it out with the dog's on the back steps."

Pier's mouth opened.

"Yes, Pier, you never knew how funny we really were, did you? That I was a hex, an' he a nut?"

"Now, now," Pederson said smoothly, standing up. "Now . . ."

"Well, if Pier thinks Stephan's nuts, he's right, of course. Why, last summer when a horse broke her leg in a kick fight, Stephan wouldn't shoot her like I told him to. An' he wouldn't call the vet. Oh no. Instead he built a chicken coop up around her, right where she fell. An' brought her food mornin', noon, an' night."

Pier caught Pederson's wink.

"Nuts? Sure, he's nuts. He gives names to all the animals, includin' the chickens. Gives them a burial sermon when they die." She stood up. "An' that ain't all. One day I saw him goin' around the pasture with a scoop an' a pail, picking up cow pies. I asked him what he was doin' that for. An' he told me, he said, 'Do you like to live in a dirty room?' He was cleanin' up the pasture like it was a house."

Pederson smiled gently.

"No, if you want to talk about the stock, go see Stephan."

Pier stood up too. "Wal, anyway, thanks a lot for the cup a coffee. Hit the spot." With Pederson, he stepped to the threshold. He said, "So long, be seein' you," and he smiled at her as he closed the door after them.

They stepped across the yard. Winged pigweed and red-gray Russian thistles tumbled over the baked soil. Near a shed with a falling roof a pile of them were mounded against a fence. The wind sussed in the eaves of the granary.

Pier heard a noise behind the shacklike barn and, opening a crumbling gate, stepped around the corner with Pederson following.

Stephan was leaning over a dead carcass of a cow near a six-foot-high mound of gray-green, weathered cow manure. Tears were running down Stephan's dirty, unshaven cheeks. The dimwit was mourning.

When Pier stepped up close, the carcass, even in death, seemed to be breathing, shuddering. Maggots, tumbling over each other in eager quest of succulent rottenness, disturbed its black-and-white envelope.

Pederson's usual smile vanished.

Pier touched Stephan's shoulder. "Hi, neighbor."

Stephan started a little, turned his head slowly like a stiff screw jack. His sagging headgear had lost all semblance of being a blue cap. Gradually the gray vapid eyes opened on Pier. Huge red sorrow veins webbed them.

"I see you got trouble," Pier said simply.

Stephan nodded. The movement ruffled the black hair hanging over the edge of his jacket collar, parted it, revealing a gray-dirty scalp beneath. Vermin scurried to get out of the way of the prying light.

"When'd she die, Stephan?"

Stephan looked at the stinking hulk. "I dunno. Minnie, she just die, I guess. Just. She got the whooping cough an' die."

Pederson broke in, "Stephan, how many cows you got left?"

Stephan sighed once more, slowly cleared up. He began audibly to count on his fingers. "Jezebel, that's one. Mother Mary, two. Sister Martha, three. Gentle Jesus, four. Johanna the Baptist—"

"Them all cows?" Pier asked, wondering.

"Sure."

"I mean, she-cows?"

"Sure. All them."

"Go on," Pederson prodded.

"Well, an' Glory, an'"—he looked around bewildered, then brightened momentarily when his eyes lighted on the dead cow at his feet—"an' Minnie." He sighed. "Poor Minnie."

Pederson asked, "Stephan, how much hay you got?"

Stephan shook his head sadly. "I ain't got no hay atall. None. An' that's what makes me feel so bad."

"Well, what are you feeding them then?"

"Come," Stephan said, turning slowly and pigeon-footing it ahead of them into the barn. His clothes, stiff with dung and clotted milk, rustled noisily as he walked.

Before Pier lay six dying cows; Frisian-Holsteins, like his own. His eyes filmed. Pitiable creatures. All were lying on the barren earth floor. They looked like the ribs of six barrels draped with canvas. When he stepped close, they weakly tried to lift their heads. Pier asked, "Ain't you got no straw atall? No beddin' of any kind?"

"No," Stephan said softly, his eyes beginning to moisten again.

Pederson asked, "But what are you feeding 'em then?"

Stephan pointed to a mound of faded gray-brown tree leaves at the end of the alley.

Pederson stepped close. "Chokecherry leaves! That stuff's poison!"

Pier looked up at the haymow above. It was empty. The cracks between the floor boards were alive with gray light.

Pederson asked gently, "And I suppose you can't afford to buy any hay?"

"No." Stephan's face suddenly gorged with animal rage. He snarled, "That Kaia! Kraaarrr! She won't give me no money! Some night I'm gonna kill her. Cut her throat. The she-devil."

"Now, now," Pederson soothed. "Take it easy. Kaia's probably as broke as the rest of us."

Stephan still growled.

Pier and Pederson exchanged glances. Pier said, "Now, Stephan, don't get any funny notions. I'm sure Kaia would give you money if she had it. She just ain't got any."

Stephan's face cleared a little. "Not?"

Pier shouted. Was the dimwit a deaf mute too? "Of course not. We're all poor."

Pederson lifted a hand. "Stephan, how would you like to give your cows all the feed they want?"

Stephan's eyes filmed with love.

"Look, Stephan. We got a friend who'll take care of your cows for you. He'll feed 'em good. He'll bed 'em down with thick gold straw at night and give 'em rich meal in the morning. And sometimes, maybe, give 'em some fine good silage."

Stephan smiled.

"We got a truck here on the yard and if it's all right with you, we'll haul 'em to this friend for you. Take 'em and bring 'em. You got time to help us load 'em up?"

Stephan's face clouded. "You take 'em away?"

"Yes."

Stephan's eyes suddenly rounded with a shrewd look. "You tell that man to bring hay here. In my barn. Then I feed 'em."

Pederson scraped the earthen floor with a speculative toe. "Well, now, Stephan, look. That wouldn't be fair, would it? He's giving the hay, you should be willing to bring the cows, huh?"

Stephan looked puzzledly at the dirt floor.

"What do you say, Stephan?"

"No, I don't like it. No."

Pier and Pederson winked at each other again. Pier said, to vary the attack, "Where's yer horses, Stephan?"

"Horses?"

"Yeh."

"Oh, Job and John are by Triggs, feedin' in Blood Run draw."

Pier nodded. "Where's the rest?"

"Well, there's Mutt. He's out there by Jeff. Jeff, he's sick. Got a broke leg." Stephan pointed to a chicken coop in the middle of the pasture. Beside it stood a white horse.

"Can we see him?"

"Sure." Stephan led the way across the prairie slopes. Below them, to the northeast, lay Starum.

When they came up close, Mutt, the white horse, whinnied. Instantly, a faint, whistling neigh sounded up from within the shack.

Pier opened the door of the coop, stepped in. The sharp reek of decaying flesh burned in his nose. A black horse, lying on its right side, its left rear leg bent off awkwardly in a sling, lay puffing and gaunt on the bare ground. Earth sores opened rawly yellow on the

underside of the creature. The thigh of the broken leg quivered. The bone below the crude sling lay loose and dead.

"You better kill her," Pier said abruptly, holding his nose.

Stephan's brows darkened.

Pederson said, "Really, Stephan. It's a dirty mean trick to let Jeff lay here like this."

Stephan began to growl.

Pier said, "Wal, it's your horse." He took Pederson by the arm. "C'mon. I'm about ready to heave up my guts."

Pederson nodded.

Outside again, Pederson said, "Stephan, really. Don't you want those cows of yours to have some real feed for once?"

"Sure."

"Then let us take your cows to this fellow."

"My cows go way?"

"You want them to live, don't you?"

"Sure."

"And you ain't got the feed?"

"That's right."

"Stephan, you better let us take them. You'll get them back someday."

"You sure?"

"Sure."

"You don't lie?"

"No."

"You promise?"

"Sure."

"You know hell is a bad place for liars?"

Pederson coughed. "Sure."

"Well, I don't know now. I . . ."

"Come, help us load 'em on the truck."

Once on the highway, Pier turned to Pederson. "Them cows won't live, will they?"

"No, they'll die."

"That's what I figgered." Pier headed the truck toward Starum. "Them cows ain't critters no more. They're crates."

Pier drove through town, turned right up a side street toward a small stockyards. On a rise overlooking the railroad tracks stood a

crowd of men. They were looking into a freshly dug trench. Beyond stood a row of stock cars.

"Hey, what's louse here?" Pier asked, slowing down.

"Sheriff Rexwinkel and his deputies are killing stock. Those that are too weak to make the trip."

"Oh-oh. I see where we break our word with Stephan."

"That's what I meant when I said I had a bad job."

"Oh." Pier stopped the truck. The motor idled beneath his feet. He pulled his corncob pipe from his pocket, lighted it. "Wal, maybe Jingle-brains won't remember he once had cows."

Pederson said nothing. He looked grayly at the men.

Sheriff Rexwinkel came up. "Hello, Frixen. Those yours?"

Pier rolled down the window. "What?"

"Those yours?"

"Nope. Stephan Memek's."

"Uh-huh." Sheriff Rexwinkel turned to Deputy Ain'it, who had come up too. "Well, here's some more target practice."

"Ain't there one you kin save?" Pier asked.

Sheriff Rexwinkel eyed him slowly, looked at the six gaunt cows. "No." He looked again. "No. Not one."

"Uh-huh."

"All right, swing your truck around by the pit, and dump 'em."

Pier put the truck in low, swung around, backed to the edge.

He stepped out. A powerful fetid odor rose from the trench. Its bottom was filled with bloody piles of blunt bones, rags of hairy skin, staring dead eyes.

Crow-faced Deputy Ain'it opened the endgate. With two other men, he shoved the collapsing cows up to the edge of the impromptu graveyard.

Sheriff Rexwinkel raised his arm. A row of grim-faced men raised shotguns. They fired. The cavernous hulks shuddered, fell over into the maw.

On the way home, Pier cashed a small cream check of seven dollars, brought the money to Stephan.

The next day he brought over a load of his precious hay, found that the crippled horse had died in the night.

· 5 ·

Pier's cows calved. They were so thin, so bony, that the birthing was like the tearing of a little dry box out of a big dry box.

And, he was short of bedding. He searched his buildings for old rags, bits of straw. He cut down dry weeds and grass in the Big Sioux Valley. He cut the fine twigs of willows. He mashed old cornstalks. He even went to the trouble of drying out a soggy straw-pile butt and used the half-decayed, manure-brown straw to keep the new skinny calves warm against the dry winter cold.

One calf, born of Young Maybelle, granddaughter of Princess, out of Old Maybelle, out of Alde Beppe, gave him trouble. Puny, it refused milk, both pail and teat, and had to be forced. When it did eat well, it became either completely constipated or wildly diarrhetic.

Pier had an impulse to laugh. The runt calf was supposed to have been twins. Ae.

The dry winter days slowly turned by.

Pier examined every thread of his living with a ruthless eye, trying to save money, trying to get through to spring. He dropped sugar, both white and brown, from their diet. He marked the sugar maples in the grove for spring tapping. He bought coarse cattle salt for table use. Again he used the smokehouse that Teo, years ago, had converted into a play haymow; the smoked ham and beef would keep them in meat through the rest of the winter and far into spring.

For flour he ground oats in the coffee grinder; for johnnycake, corn. Both he and Teo were surprised to discover that the homemade foods actually tasted fresh and clean.

One forenoon, as Pier sat in his armchair by the stove grinding food for the day, he saw Red Joe drive on the yard with his truck. The machine rolled heavily, as if it had a load on. Pier saw Teo point to the house, and in a moment Red Joe came shuffling in.

"Hi," Pier greeted cheerily.

"Hi, yerself," Red Joe returned, looking around, his covert eyes examining the floor, the top of the stove, the sink, the pantry.

"Sit down," Pier said, "take a load off yer feet."

Red Joe did.

"What's louse today?"

"Nothin' much. Thought I'd come over an' grind me up some feed on your corn grinder."

Pier laughed. "You'll have to use this coffee grinder."

Red Joe grinned too. "Why, the big one in the crib broke?"

"No. I'm just kiddin'."

"Uh-huh." Red Joe looked at the neat green-yellow linoleum floor. "By God, you actually clean up after yerself."

"Why sure."

"Huh. I expected to find you up to yer ears in dirt."

Pier grinned, set the coffee grinder on the table.

Red Joe took off his mittens and thrust them into a side pocket. He tried to cross his bowlegs, couldn't.

Pier laughed. "Do you mean to tell me you can't cross yer legs?"

Red Joe reddened, tried again. This time he almost fell from his chair.

Pier hit the table. "Judas Priest. An' I kin do it as easy as pie. Look." Effortlessly he threw one lank leg over the other.

Red Joe set his legs apart and threw his dusty, milk-spotted cap on the table. "Aw, the hell with it."

Pier tipped back in his chair. "You ain't growed yit, Red Joe."

"I said, 'T'hell with it.' "

"Want a cup a tea?"

"Don't you drink coffee no more?"

"I did. But give it up."

"Uh-huh."

"You'll have a cup?"

"Sure."

"Or would you like a glass a aniseed milk?"

Red Joe's eyes lighted. "Say, that would be just dandy. Just the ticket. I ain't had that since Ma Lysbeth used to live here." Red Joe chuckled, rolled his chew of tobacco on his open palm, laid it on the edge of the table.

Presently the aniseed milk with its sweet, sharp smell was ready. Pier poured out two glasses of the steaming, white, heat-troubled fluid.

They sipped together.

Red Joe pointed at the coffee grinder. "That don't look like coffee to me."

"It's corn."

"Makin' corn mush?"

"Sure. Got to work from where you are, you know."

"Right you are. I wish I could make Edna see that. But she wouldn't." Red Joe sipped. "Hell, she claims now it's my fault we're starvin'. Says I'm such a poor pervider I oughta go kill myself from shame." Red Joe's eyes became bitter, wrinkled. "Pier, let me give you a piece of advice. Now that Nertha's gone, play aroun', an' never get married again. Sure, sure. Nertha was a good woman, but . . . just the same, never get hooked up with a female critter again." Red Joe bibbered. "Man, I sure wish I could drop into yer shoes."

"Mine?"

"Yessir. You lucky dog."

"You mean, have nothin' to do with wimmen atall?"

Red Joe paused. "Well, I wouldn't go that far. I will agree there's one thing wimmen are good for. That's night work. But outside of that . . . *puertt* on them."

"Wal," Pier said, eager for the tug and pull of a playful argument, "wal, I've heard even that ain't what it's cracked up to be."

"Don't you like to knit?"

"Sure I like to knit. I like it as well as anybody else. Hell, I'm a reg'lar wildcat knitbutt myself, but just the same, it's highly overrated. It's all in yer head."

Red Joe emptied his glass. "Got any more?"

"Sure." Pier refilled it.

"Well," Red Joe said cautiously, "two things I am sure about. First, I'd never marry a woman again. Second, I'd play the field when it came to knittin'."

Pier laughed. "Wal, you got a point there. It is a trial to live with wimmen. And it is true a man has to be pretty down an' out to walk away from it."

Red Joe suddenly laughed, almost choking on a swallow of milk. "That reminds me of a story."

"Oh, one a them things again."

"Wanna hear it or not?"

"Go ahead, go ahead. I'm listenin'."

"Well, there was once a feller by the name of Cephas livin' t'Philosophy, South Dakota. Cephas was down an' out, down to his last sticks. All his critters was starved or dead or sold. All he had left was his wife Beulah, an' two chickens, a rooster and a hen, white Wyandottes. That's all."

"Huh," Pier grunted, sipping, "he was down to where the hair was short."

"He was. Well, finally they came to a mornin' when they had to leave. Cephas was so doggoned hungry he could chew wood. An' he says to his wife, as they was packin' up to go, 'Y'u sure there ain't no grub in the house no more?' An' she says, 'No, not one crumb.' 'Ye're sure?' 'No, not one crumb.' 'Did y'u look in the breadbox?' 'No, not a crumb there either.' 'In the coffee can?' 'No, not a bean there either.' And Cephas, he clumps down in his chair an' looks out the winder, chewin' his yeller tobaccer teeth. Finally he asks, 'Did y'u look in the flour bin?' 'Yes. An' there wasn't a speck there either.' Cephas says, 'Beulah! There must be something there. Look, let's take a knife an' scrape it. Maybe there's a little flour caught in the sides of the wood.' So they scraped the sides of the flour bin an', after a half hour a work, they got two little handfuls a flour an' slivers. An' Cephas laughs, an' he says, 'Beulah, we got a big meal comin'. Beulah, run yer finger around inside the lard jar there. Dig me up enough fat to dip me a doughnut yit. Doughnuts! They've always been my favorite. They stick to yer ribs.' So Beulah wipes, an' sure enough, they get a little fat to fry the doughnut in."

"Want another glassful?" Pier interrupted, holding up the pitcher of aniseed milk.

"Sure, pour me another. Tastes good. Say, you ain't got me a slice a bread, has y'u? This story is makin' me both dry an' hungry."

Pier grinned, got up, set out a few slices of bread and a dish of butter and a few knives.

Red Joe took on. "Yeh. Well, anyways, his wife Beulah mixes the flour an' the slivers, an' sifts it, an' fixes up the soft dough fer the doughnuts. There's just enough fer two. An' Beulah says, 'Cephas,' she's a kind of a funny woman, gets funny notions sometimes, is always playin' pretend games, 'Cephas,' she says, 'Cephas, go out on the yard an' do yer chores. How kin you expect to get breakfast if you don't earn it?' Cephas, he scares, an' looks at his

wife sideways, an' wonders if she's got it at last, if she's bit the loco-weed. But, he's a waitin' man, he is, an' he knows when to humor her. She ain't got the doughnuts done yit, see, an' he don't want to spoil her mood until they're done. So he goes outdoors, pretendin' he's got chores to do, like she says. But once he gets outside the door, he throws off the pretendin' an' sneaks around the side of the house to watch her boil the doughnuts. An' his nitwit wife, being a kind of a wise woman too, she sees him, an' she feels sorry fer him, an' when she hauls up the first doughnut, out a the steamin' fat, she opens the pantry window an' hands it to him. An' the poor guy, he's so hungry, so terribly hungry, he makes a grab fer the doughnut. But the doughnut's too hot, an' he burns his fingers, an' he drops it. The doughnut falls to the ground, on the dust, an' bounces, an' starts rollin' down the yard toward the barn. Now, right behind Cephas was their only rooster, standing in line for the doughnuts, waitin' fer his share a the crumbs. When the doughnut goes bouncin' past his eyes, the rooster throws out his wings, lifts up his head, cockle-loodle-dos, an' then, wing down, neck out, takes after the doughnut hell-a-kitin' down the yard toward the barn. Now, down the yard a piece is the only hen they got. She's busy lookin' under little stones fer worms, an' under the tree leaves fer bugs. An' then, all of a sudden, she sees the rooster a-comin' with that woman-heifer look in his red-dot eye. An' she thinks, 'Glory be! The old man's still got a little bite left in his spur.' An' she twists her white neck, an' looks herself over, an' primps, an' settles herself down in the dust to make a nice soft bed for him. The little white Wyandotte hen even turns back her tail a little, as if she's turnin' back the covers of a bed fer him."

Pier's eyes began to roll. His mouth opened and set itself for a wild laugh.

"Well, sir, the rooster, he comes on. He comes flyin' in the direction a the hen. She wiggles in the dust, openin' her arms. He comes on. She closes her eyes, waitin'. Glory be! An' then . . . the rooster sails right on by still chasin' the doughnut, leavin' the pretty little white Wyandotte hen sittin' in the dust countin' her toes."

Pier snorted.

"An' Cephas, who's been watchin' all this commotion on his yard with his wife, he turns to her an' says, says, shakin' his head, 'You know, I sure hope I never get that hungry!' "

Pier roared. He hit the table with his fist, fell back in his armchair. Milk spilled out of the corners of his mouth, trickled down his gray bearded chin.

Just then the noon-hour siren shrilled up from Starum.

Red Joe jumped up, instantly sobering. "Holy smokes, I wasted a whole mornin'. An' I still got my feed to grind."

Pier sobered too. "That's the way it goes. The minute y'u start to enjoy yerself, time goes like the wind. Flewt."

Red Joe picked up his chewed ball of tobacco from the table and mouthed it. He drew on his mittens. He glanced at the coffee grinder, at the sack of raw corn, and said, his eyes snapping with inward mirth, "You know, if you get too hungry fer meat, you kin always can gophers. There's plenty a them. Millions."

"Funny thing is, I've been thinkin' a doin' just that."

"But I mean it," Red Joe said, chewing again, "they're doin' it all over the country. Why! a man by the name a Cephas t'Philosophy, South Dakota, even tried it."

"Yeh, an' I suppose his rooster went fer that too."

Red Joe chuckled. "No. That was the one time the little white hen got her glory."

BOOK FIVE

GOD'S COUNTRY

1. THE GENTLE HEIFER

. 1 .

DDENLY THE GREAT BLUE SPREAD OF THE HEAVENS filled with flying snow.

Great raggy clouds dragged over the Dakota country, came on toward Sioux Falls, toward Devil's Gulch, ranging the Gitchie Manitou bluffs, draping the red quartzite cliffs lining the Big Sioux banks, swerveling around the ancient Blood Run mounds, whirlwinding through the old creek draw, up and over Red Bluff, dispersing moisture over the whole of the northwest land of Iowa.

From January 17 on the snow fell every day, building up to a freezing driving blizzard on February 8. Gorges filled level full. Gullies vanished. Hoarse winds built up snowbanks as high as hills.

Roads were closed for weeks. Everywhere, to the east and the west, to the north and the south, lay a rippling expanse of new white snow.

Some days the snow fell lightly, gently, like a lover's brushing touch. Some days the wind bulled it through.

When the snowfall was gentle, it spread like a goose-down quilt, sprinkling the tops of things with magic flakes. Thick fluffs of snow crowned all things, fence posts, tree limbs, pails, frozen chickens, squirrel nests high in the cottonwoods, chimney ledges, wagon wheels, old dust drifts.

When the weather was gruff, the wind ground the snowflakes into fine powder. The blasts drilled snow powder through all the cracks, through thin woods, through shawls and single mittens. It swirled up under eaves and forced itself into the house and woodshed. It parted the fur of the young dog Shep, chilled his flesh.

All through the blizzard Pier and Teo crept over the yard, head down, bucking it, turning their backs, slapping their long arms around their barrel chests until the blood warmed and gurgled again in their finger tips.

There was never a moment for reverie. The mind was too busy fending itself against the dangers around. Stiff from the enclosing and encroaching frost, it fought sluggishly, directed dumb arms and legs through the fluffy welter of flying elements and drifting snowbanks.

The snow welled up like rising dough. It crept into outdoor boots bound tight with black buckles. It sifted into shoes, into socks. It crawled up pant legs, through woolen underwear.

Toes stung; numbed; then became spuriously warm.

Cheeks burned; flushed like red fires; stiffened; became white.

The stoves, both the range in the kitchen and the hard-coal burner in the living room, blazed furiously. The house cracked and quivered, torn by the endless wrestle between the bulging heat on the inside and the forcing cold on the outside. Both the kettle and the teapot simmered noisily on the back of the range.

Windows frosted until only an opaque light came through. Long billowing plumage, fantastic feathers, small whirlpool whorls, sweeping lithe silt-gray, spread over the panes. It was matter stirred by whimsical motion.

To see outside Pier had to scratch off the frost with the long

blade of his knife. At night the frost at the base of the panes sometimes thickened to more than an inch in depth, forming solid columns, weird ribbed pillars. During the day the heat of the stove melted it a little, and it ran down onto the sill where the inseeping cold froze it into coagulated lardlike masses.

The roads closed. The mailman couldn't make it. Even Goldfish Gil, the legendary road breaker, was stopped at last.

Only the telephone reached in from the outside. Central was kept busy day and night answering emergency calls, sending out rescue parties to various parts of the country. Some families starved. Those who had no phone were checked on by those who had. Every living inhabitant of the county was daily accounted for by the sheriff. Old Whiskers, a hermit living in a Hills-of-the-Lord cave west of the Big Sioux, was brought to the Rock Falls hospital more dead than alive by Teo and Jimmy. It took the two daring boys, riding horseback, three days to get him in. Five miles south a woman died and her funeral was delayed a week when the hearse stalled in a twenty-foot drift. The stiff body lay cold in the snow, alone, with no weepers, no ceremony.

Sometimes as many as a dozen people gossiped on the country line at once, creating, in the white immane isolation, a telephonic kaffeeklatsch. At the request of a lonesome bachelor, Pier one time enlivened the singing wires with music by putting the receiver of his phone into the horn of his new radio. Teo had begged for the radio so insistently that Pier had at last ordered one out of a mail-order-house wish book. In the white eternity that had fallen on them, people became brothers and sisters together.

Once Pier stepped over to Kaia, who had no phone, to see how Stephan was making it with the new animals he had. The summer before, in 1935, the neighbors around had pitched in to buy Stephan a horse, three cows, and a frisky, black-and-white Frisian-Holstein bull. Pier was more than a little interested in the bull since his own, bought from a Sioux County farmer two years before, had proved a deadhead. Pier found the dimwit Stephan warm and safe in the barn with his new kine and his two horses. In the house he found Kaia and her canaries cheerful as usual.

Wild life tamed. Pheasants and prairie chickens huddled together against the front door of the house, crept into the barn with the

cattle, hopped into the chicken house with the hens and roosters. One morning Pier found a cottontail and a wolf warm together in the woodpile.

At last the blizzard subsided. Snowbanks lay in gigantic windrows across the rolling loam.

The highway men dug out the roads. Telephone poles, deep under the snow in some places, no longer served as guides for the snowplow drivers. Sometimes rotary plows ran into them, chewing up the splintering cedar before the startled crews could right themselves.

Sometimes gentle snows fell, sometimes the wind blew a little, filling in behind the snowplows. Most roads became one-way lanes. Snow lay piled ten to twenty feet to either side of the highway. Some east-west road cuts, fifty feet deep, were completely drifted shut. Driving down the one-way corridors was like going down a canyon of white rock.

The snow was a great blessing. Pier was sure of it. The enormous masses of melting snow were sure to soak the earth next spring. No summer sun could ever possibly dry out the land again.

Standing by the north window, scratching out a peephole in the frosted pane, he surveyed his yard. Rises and falls of snow had taken the place of the red-brown drifts. Where was the torch-hot breath of the summer sun? Where the chinch bugs, the grasshoppers? Where the earthquake at Dubuque? The tornado at Anxious trumpeting across the plains like a mad elephant?

Snow had come. Snow. Snow had cleansed the earth. Ae. Blue-white snow had wiped the dust glaze from the face of the sun.

Pier hummed to himself, combed his prematurely white hair with coarse fingers. He whistled. He turned on the radio, listened to cowboy and country songs coming from a prairie station.

Pier made some tea. He sipped, leg up over the stove, humming to himself, singing his old song again:

"I am a farmer on the Sioux,
I laugh at all of you.
My cribs are gold with corn and wheat
I laugh at drought and heat.
Oh! I laugh at all of you."

Then, turning a little, so that the other side of him could warm up too, he sang on:

"Oh, braid her a crown of clover,
Braid it pink and green and silver."

Vaguely he recalled the beginning of an old tune. Carefully he fumbled through the sheaves of his memory. Just as he was sure he had captured it, half of it broke away. He searched, searched, humming over again and again the bit that he had caught, hoping that he could entice the other out of the sleep of the past:

"Mother and father
Home and acre . . ."

He sipped. He beamed. In the warm kitchen, leaning over the stove, his lean gray face became momentarily flushed again.

This year he would do her. Yessir. Ac. He knew it. It was in his bones. He grinned. He would show the Âlde Han. The Old Boy had better not try to be sly around him this time.

One morning, the twenty-sixth of February, the day Teo and Jimmy had gone off on a lark to Sioux Falls in Red Joe's truck, Pier decided to make an accounting of Âlde Hengist's activities with the cows. He was pretty sure that the bull-boy had failed to catch a couple of them. Young Maybelle, for one, showed every sign of being still unbred.

He dressed warmly, drawing on a pair of stiff soiled overalls on top of a pair of blue wool worsted trousers, once his Sunday best. He put on two shirts, one of them woolen; and then, underneath the bib of his overall, pulled on Nertha's old gray sweater. He put on a leather jacket; and, over that, his worn red-and-black mackinaw. His thick flannel-lined cap came deep down over his ears. He buckled on his red rubber overshoes, put on his double-thick woodchopper mittens, stepped outdoors.

The northeast wind was tight against him as he stepped down the walk. Loose snow blew around. The gray sky was lowering. It was cold out.

He turned past the house, entered the tunnel that he and Teo had dug through a towering snowbank near the old well. The tunnel lifted over the old dust drift near the box elder, then slid down. It

opened near the gate. A whimsical eddy in the storm had left the ground barren at the base of the well.

The water heater in the tank was out. Pier looked into it, discovered that falling snow had choked it. He took off the two-pipe chimney, cleaned it, cleaned out the grate, noticed how the gray ashes and the snow blended off into each other, dropped in a handful of cobs. He poured in a splash of kerosene from a little can, dropped in a flaring match. In a moment smoke lifted from the pipe, twisting, vanishing into the low gray clouds.

He dug the ax out of the snow, stepped on the ice in the tank, slammed the heavy steel into the ice. The frozen mass splintered. Chips sprayed against his thick pant legs.

Soon water bubbled through. Upon each stroke, a fine sprettle of moisture, freezing as it flew, thickened on his clothes. The wetness worked up the handle of the ax and into his leather mittens. His mittens became sopped and cold. He stopped to slap his arms around his chest. The bundling clothes cramped his slinging arms. Soon his finger tips crackled with warming blood. He finished chopping out a hole in the foot-thick ice.

He looked at the engine, now covered with a tarpaulin and snow, shook his head. To cut down on expenses he had decided a month ago to do the pumping by hand. Pumping for all the stock was mean, chilling work.

Pier stepped onto the platform over the well. He brushed the snow off the handle, worked it. After a few strokes it held water, and, turning to face it to get a good working stance, he went at it. He pumped. His fingers slowly stiffened with cold again. The wet leather stuck to the chilled cast-iron handle. Again he stopped to slap his arms around his body. He tried to light his pipe, found the stem too cold for his lips. He put it away.

The wind rose. Loose snow began to fluff in his face. The wind scruffed the tops of the vast snowbanks. Running eddies swirled and played in the lee of the tank. A shawl-long stream of snow blew off the south edge of the house. Powdery scarfs snapped like white flags from the roof of the granary.

The wind blew, became cold. His nose ran. An icicle grew on the tip of it, lengthening until he could see it spearing past his lips.

Pier pumped until he had four inches of water in the tank; then quit.

Again he tinkered with the stove. It was hot now, and the ice around its sides had begun a frayed reluctant retreat. He held his wet mittens against the pipe until they dried a little.

He followed a deep canyon across the yard. It split near the barn, one path going to the horse door on the right, the other to the cow door on the left. Pier swung right, unlatched both the upper and lower doors. A swirl of misty warmth brushed his face as he entered.

The horses looked up. Behind them lay mounds of bun-shaped droppings, part frozen, part warm and steaming. He ran his cold fingers over the long hairy backs of the animals as he stepped between them. He murmured to them, unhaltered them, and sent them outdoors with a slap on the rump. The horses sniffed in the doorway. Frigid whips of wind stirred in their nostrils and manes. They snorted, stepped gingerly into the crinching snow.

While the horses were out drinking, Pier filled their mangers with the stiff weeds and grass he had raked up in the Big Sioux Valley. He gave them some oats. Before he finished cleaning the stables, they came back in, snorting, rowdy. He closed the door and haltered them up again.

He went over to the cow-barn side. The cattle steamed with warmth. The gutter behind them, full of reeking piles of fresh green droppings, smoked with vapor. He walked along behind the black-and-whites, mentally noting which were with calf.

He stopped behind Young Maybelle. He looked her over, felt underneath her flank, lighted his pipe, mused, studied her some more, at last nodded. Ae, the bull was a deadhead. Better castrate him, fatten him, butcher him.

Pier leaned against the dung-spattered alley wall. He brewed to himself. Ae, there was only one thing to do: have Young Maybelle serviced by Stephan's bull.

A cow staled, splashed on his trousers. He jumped to one side.

He went to the door, opened the upper half. He sniffed the air, wondering if the weather were changing for the worse. He squinted at the gray lineless sky, at the few falling flakes of snow. A northeast wind usually meant trouble. He measured the speed of the wind with a practiced eye. At last he decided that the weather would hold, that he could service the heifer after he had watered the cows and cleaned their gutter.

He opened the lower door and hooked both to the side of the

barn. He stepped back inside and began to unsnap the stanchions, going down the line of cows and slapping their slow heads. The cows moved dumbly. He picked up a stick and cracked each lightly over the back. Some of the cows had the fine habit of spilling dung just before they stepped out of the door.

One of the stanchions opened stiffly. He inspected it. He took out his jackknife, snapped open the long blade. He pared down one side of a two-by-six. The nickel-shiny steel had a keen edge. It cut well. He nicked off a few more slivers, then tried the stanchion. It clicked to easily.

While the cows drank, he carried out the green dripping slop, scoopful by scoopful. Each fell with a sodden flopping sound on the mound south of the barn.

The barn smelled sweetly of rich alfalfa and rotted dung. Curls of warm black-and-white hair, worn from the bellies of the cows, lay in the rubble nests where the animals had balled up for the night.

The cows finished drinking. They stood in the snow-narrowed yard, their rubbery snouts trailing long thin icicles.

He drove them in before a swinging stick. When Young Maybelle twice tried to cover another cow, as if she were a bull potent with seed, he smiled to himself. She was in heat. Ae. Stephan's bull would finish her off in a hurry.

He locked the stanchions. He closed the door against the cold again. He gave the cows some silage. He carried water to the calves.

At last he was ready to go. He decided against driving over with horse and wagon. Walking was warmer. Just to make sure, he went to the house to change his mackinaw for a knee-long sheepskin coat.

He returned to the barn, haltered the heifer, led her outdoors.

He started down the lane. The heifer followed willingly enough. She frisked her tail. Sometimes she stepped on his heel, sometimes bumped his behind with a warm nose.

The huge, heavy coat warmed him. The soft fur of the collar caressed his cheek. With his blue woolen cap above, almost all of his head was covered. Only the point of his red nose poked through. He viewed the world through a short narrow funnel.

The wind sharpened a bit. Blusters of snow flew across his path.

The road was rough. He stepped along the ruts, slipping, catching himself, losing his balance, gaining it again. The heifer floundered after.

Suddenly the wind changed, from northeast to northwest. The gray lineless sky contorted, bulged up, became mad.

Coarse clouds drove out of the northwest sky. The wind thickened with snow, howled in the hollow-steel fence posts. By the time he had turned the corner and had headed north toward Kaia's farm, the track in the road ahead was almost obliterated.

The clouds came thicker. The snow fell heavier. The wind flailed even more fiercely.

He pressed on doughtily.

The great Canadian refrigerated wind hollered down from Drumheller, from the northwest, roared up from Bearpaw Mountain. Across the Dakotas it shoved snow-heavy clouds. All around, and all over and upon the Big Sioux folds of land, it spewed tons and tons of sleep-white snow.

The wind angered Pier. He leaned into it, stomping along. The impulse to turn around and go home he kicked from his mind. He was already halfway. Besides, it wasn't good to get in the habit of postponing work. Don't wait until tomorrow to do what you can do today. Ae.

The wind raged. It came through his peephole like the heel of a frozen hand. Snow jabbed a million needles into his nose, into his forehead. The fringes of the woolen collar froze stiff-gray from his breathing.

He snuggled inside his sheepskin. He kept changing the heifer's halter rope from one hand to the other, jabbing the free hand into the deep belly pocket of the coat.

The storm droned around him.

The road ahead narrowed into a one-way snow cut. Pier stumbled along through it, the heifer following obediently. The wind was so cold on his brow he could feel his brains freezing. His brows felt like frozen hairy caterpillars. His nose first pointed with pain; then went numb; then, oddly, warmed. He blocked out the wind from his peephole with a covering arm. He held it there until his wrist, exposed to the flying cold, stiffened; then thrust his hand into his belly pocket again.

The snow-sharp wind became a gale. Car tracks in the one-way vanished. The long corridor began to fill with new snowbanks.

He forced along. He smacked his feet down firmly to keep them tingling and warm. He balled his leg muscles. With fiery heart he

resisted the wind. It was never going to bowl him over. He bucked it, shoved, plunged. His feet sank into the new-driven snow.

The walls of the one-way disappeared beneath the piling, driving white. He stopped to look around. He couldn't find the tops of the fence posts. He looked back. His tracks had vanished.

But he felt sure he was going right, and pressed on.

He plunged through the crust of an old snowbank, sinking to his hips. He scrambled out. Then the heifer went down, struggled, got out too.

Again Pier stopped to make a survey, holding his face out of the chilling wind, shielding his body behind the heifer. Looking out of his pagodalike sheepskin collar, he found the world small, and varying. Great drifts and swirls and sweeps of snow snaked past like the smokes of racing prairie fires. A mighty plains-sweeping, river-freezing blizzard had taken possession of the world.

He realized he was lost, lost on a swallowing sea of prairie snow. He had probably left the road long ago. He might have drifted off to the right and into Stephan's pasture, he might have gone off to the left and into his own cornfield. There was no telling.

And walking on would not help. In this mad, white violence he would only lose himself more.

He settled against the heifer. The heifer stirred, tried to get on the lee side of him. They struggled in the hip-deep, flour-fine snow.

Cold crept into his clothes, thread by thread, layer by layer. His warm heart fought against the encircling enemy.

His body began to sting. He stirred, then sagged closer against the huddling heifer.

His body became numb. He began to feel warm and sleepy.

He half dreamed, half mused. Ae, he was freezing to death. The end was here. Ae.

He nodded. How pleasant the Âlde Han made death seem. Nothing like that fall from the mill. Nothing like that splash in Devil's Gulch. No breathing on the neck, no mouth opening around.

Was this really it? The question turned in his mind like a slow ladle churning in frozen cream. This it?

He stirred; then, with a sudden flash, remembered there was a good year coming.

He moved. He forced his stiffened mind to awaken itself. He grabbed the ladle by the handle, helped stir the cream.

Awake! Awake!

Then Young Maybelle floundered to her feet. He tipped over in the snow. His nose, face, shoulders, plunged into a drift. He bulked up, spitting, blowing. He staggered to his feet, cursing. Angrily he tried to kick at the heifer. He laughed insanely at his clumsiness.

A desperation worked in him. His mind became quick again. He wanted to live. He had to find a warm spot quickly.

He felt around for the heifer. At least she had given him one warm side.

An evil idea possessed, entered his mind. Kill the heifer! Tear out her bowels, crawl inside the warm room her belly!

He fumbled for his jackknife. He took off his mitten. Painfully, clumsily, he shoved his hand deep into his pocket, at last found the knife. With slow fingers, he pried open the long blade. He ran his numb finger over the edge. He put on his mitten again.

He turned, facing the heifer. In the dim world, and peering out of his enveloping collar, he could just make her out.

A thought, the thought that he was killing a stem-heifer, a potential mother of coming herds, entered his mind. He hesitated. Pondered.

Then, biting his teeth, convincing himself that one of them alive was worth more than two of them dead, stealthily, like a weasel out to suck the blood of a throat, he inched along her side, his knees nudging through the crinching snow.

He reached around her shoulder to steady himself. He put the tip of the knife lightly between two ribs. Below beat her heart. With a sudden gathering of muscles, he jammed the blade through. The steel edge crisped on the bone, entered.

The heifer jerked, started; then flopped over in the snow. She convulsed once; lay dead. Quickly, with feverish energy, with a power he never knew he had, he sliced open the hide on her belly. Blood welled from the slit edges; froze. The knife was sharp. It cut flesh. It parted the cartilage jointures of her ribs. Straining, groaning, gasping, he broke open her belly. Lungs, stomach, bowels tipped out like a mass of steaming jungle snakes, wriggling, turning, writhing. He pocketed the knife. Hurriedly he scooped out a deep hole in the snow, then dropped in the heifer. He stripped off his sheepskin, bundling his legs in it. He ducked down, thrust his head and shoulders into the warm cavern of the heifer's belly. The red-ribbed

cavern was surprisingly roomy. He reached through the opening below the floating ribs to draw his legs and sheepskin up close. Directly in front of his nose he parted the fold of her flesh a little, opening up a vent for breathing.

Gradually the body of the dead heifer warmed the upper half of him. The close oily air within the cavern warmed. He waited. Huddled.

Many hours later, he stirred. He had fallen asleep. He found himself awakening, moving. He smelled cut flesh. He awoke with a start, bumping his head against ribs. Then remembered.

Drifting snow had partially blocked up the breathing hole. He tried to move his arms and found, to his surprise, that they were still limber. And his chest and shoulders still felt warm. He stirred his hips. They too were pliable. He thought of his feet, tried to stir them, found them stiff.

He forced his mind down to his toes. He tried to wiggle them. But they were feelingless.

He poked the snow out of the breathing hole. He looked out, found it dark.

The wind was dying. Shawls of snow were hanging idly. The storm was lowering its pennants.

He snuggled a moment longer; then stirred. He rolled his shoulders. He found that the heifer had stiffened, that the lips of the cavern wouldn't part. He doubled his arms, set his shoulders, heaved. The rib case cracked like a heavy door hard to open.

He tried something else. He wriggled backward, slid out of the hole below the floating ribs.

He rolled out on the snow. He tried to move his legs again, found them bent and hard.

He doubled up and got to his knees. Then, one slow leg at a time, he stood up, bent over. He moved around. From the hip down it was like walking on posts. He stomped, holding his face in his hands. He put on his sheepskin, staggered some more. His leg bones felt so numbed, so cold, he could feel the stump end of his shank bones pounding into the cold iron his ankle.

In the black night the snow gave off a low phosphorescent glow.

He went along, picking his way carefully.

His foot crunched on something hard. He leaned over to catch it up with a stiff mittened hand. He brought it up to his face, found it to be a crust of snow. In the dim light it looked like sugar crushed in butter. It was the crushed snow of a car track. He was back on the highway.

The wind slowed. Above him the flowing sheets of snow thinned, then parted.

Presently a milk-silver moon shone through.

Pier gazed at it, tried to fix himself on the earth in relation to it; east, west, north, south—then realized he had been heading north as he intended.

A snowflake fell on the edge of his sheepskin collar, right at the point of his nose. His eyes crossed a little to look at it. The flake was glistening perfection. The fragile six-pointed jewel, gleaming in the moonbeams, so close to his eyes, was like a miniature Frisian flower doily crocheted with glittering silk.

The veils of snow parted again, fell down, fluttered close to the ground. The moon shone.

And there, before him, to the left, lay Kaia's yard. After all that struggling he was still only a mile from home. Ae. Kaia's place.

He rubbed his face involuntarily, and discovered his cheeks were stiff. He stirred, stomped stiff-legged toward her house. A faint light shone in back.

The walk to the house was painful. It seemed endless. His legs were like a child's. He had to learn to walk all over again.

His eyes worked stiffly, as if they had jelled in their sockets. He recalled little Teo's story of the blinded Cyclops and Ulysses. He smiled, and instantly felt his face cracking and stinging.

He knocked on the door. He bumped against it. Then, not waiting, he fumbled with the handle. It opened and he fell into the kitchen, flat on his face. With an effort he got to his feet. He staggered, feeling about in the dark for a chair. He found one, sat down. Then he reached back and slammed the door to.

On the other side of the kitchen a dim light appeared against a half-opened door; then Kaia came in with a small kerosene lamp. Its orange light blushed upward into her fear-lifted face.

"Who's there?" she whispered, holding her black robe close, her rings glowing sullenly.

"It's me. Pier."

"Saints and stars alive! Where have you been?"

He tried to smile at her.

"You had me scared half to death." She gulped air.

"Wal, bein' scared to death ain't half as bad as bein' froze to death."

She drew closer, set the lamp on the table, turned up the wick. She looked at him suspiciously. "What are you doin' up this time of the night?"

Again he tried to smile.

She leaned forward. "Why, man, you're froze! An' all that blood!"

Pier took off his crimson mittens.

"What're you doin' out on a night like this anyway?"

"Milkin' pigeons."

She laughed then, and drew closer. "That I believe."

Pier's lips began to sting. He fingered them. "Wal, I started out with a heifer this mornin'. Was gonna get her serviced with Stephan's new bull. But I guess I got caught in a quick blizzard." With thumb-thick fingers he opened his sheepskin, unbuckled his boots.

She drew in a breath. She gazed at him, wonderingly. Her black hair tumbled straight and glossy over her shoulders. She said, "You could a froze to death out there. Here, I'll get you some snow to rub on them froze spots."

"No, no. Don't. It ain't good to use snow. Teo was readin' where it's best to hold yer hand over it, an' to move around a little on yer feet."

"Well," she began uncertainly, "well, you know best." She turned to the stove. "At least I can poke up the fire."

"Sure, go ahead. That'll be fine." He got to his feet. He muttered, "Got to kick the frost out a my joints."

"You'd like a cup a tea?"

"You betcha."

She filled the stove, set on the teakettle, stepped back, marveling. "For a man who's half dead with cold you sure got a lively tongue."

Pier grinned. He waved his arms, stomped his leaden feet. "Wal, when you play a lone hand for a while, you get that way."

She shook her head. She dug up a bowl of savory chicken soup. Soon the kitchen filled with the sweet aroma of dried celery leaves.

Pier bumbled around, slowly warming, holding first one cheek, then the other.

He thawed out. Soon his cheeks were a singing red, his tearing nose a lively scarlet.

He took off his bloodied sheepskin. He sat down again. He threw off his cap, his white hair fluffing up. Needles of pain stung in his toes, his ankles, his thighs, his fingers and face and ears. "Where's Stephan? In the barn?"

"Yes."

"Huh. He's probably warmer there than we here by the stove."

She laughed. She picked up a tangerine shawl from the back of a chair on the other side of the table. She toyed with it.

Pier mused, gazing at the floor, rubbing his stinging legs, "Yeh, an' Stephan's bull got cheated out of a little fun."

She looked at him with a merry, twisting smile. "What do you mean?"

"I killed the heifer."

"What?"

"Yep. I killed her. That was that blood you saw. I made a stove out a her. A red-hot stove. Otherwise I would a froze."

She looked at him unbelievingly.

"Why, where do you think I've been sittin' since mornin', on a snowbank somewheres smokin' my pipe?"

She smiled, and brushed back her hair.

"Say, that reminds me," he muttered. "My pipe. I could go fer a good smoke about now." He tried to push his aching, awkward hand into the bib pocket of his overall.

"Here. Wait a minute," Kaia said, coming toward him, leaning over him. Her robe opened, revealing two pulpy breasts tucked into a nightgown. She reached down and deftly pulled out his corncob pipe. She found his silver tobacco box, filled his pipe, handed it to him. She struck a match and held the flame for him.

"Ah," Pier sighed, inhaling, puffing, "ah, that's sure good. Now to take off my boots an' I'll be in heaven for sure." He took off his boots, leather jacket, took down the top of his overall and peeled off Nertha's old sweater. He also took off his shoes, his cotton socks. "Talk about cold," he said, between puffs on his corncob, "just look at them." The toes were pasty yellow. He worked them slowly, rubbed them, held them.

Kaia brought out cups and a bowl, some silverware, and poured the tea and chicken soup.

Pier slupped hungrily at the soup. He bibbered the tea.

His eyes filled with tears. He was filled with the wonder of his escape. He beamed.

He choked on a swallow of tea. He coughed, his face reddening. "Huh, must a went down my Sunday pipe."

Kaia sipped slowly. She watched him. "You goin' back tonight?"

"Wal," Pier jollied, winking, hardly knowing what he was saying, "wal, I could cut a bed with you."

She laughed, looked down. "What would the neighbors say?"

"Wal," Pier asked, suddenly bold, "wal, what would you say?"

She played with the loose shawl, brushed her hair, smiled to herself.

"Wal?" Pier marveled at his own daring. The storm must have blasted all good sense out of his head.

"I don't think it would be right," she said at last, still looking down and smiling to herself. "I think you better sleep in the guest room."

Pier felt his neck thicken. His overall felt too snug. He too looked to one side. His face fired. His blood raced. He knew she wasn't a virgin. She probably wouldn't make much of a fuss.

There was a rattling at the door. He looked, guiltily. Nertha? Her spirit? His conscience? The Âlde Han?

In taut, grave silence he finished his soup, his tea.

She showed him into the guest room, brushing against him at the door, smiling at him. She closed the door.

Again he fired. With whanging eardrums, sitting on the edge of the bed, he undressed in the dark.

He heard her rustling around in the kitchen, heard her shut down the fire.

He listened to her moving around in her bedroom. He heard her bed creak. Then it was still.

Sighing, he finished undressing and turned in between the woolen blankets.

His mind drifted. Sleep poured into his skull like thick, folding syrup.

Then, for a second, misgivings freshened his mind. Kaia was known to have bedbugs. The blankets might be lousy with them. He shifted his long, aching, stinging bones uneasily. He waited for a bite. And waiting, fell asleep.

It seemed but a moment and then there was a light in the room. He opened his eyes. It was Kaia, with her bed lamp. She stood by his bed, now wearing only a nightgown.

He sat up. "What's the matter?"

"Nothin'. I was only wonderin' if I left a window open in here."

"Oh."

"But I guess I didn't." She stood uncertainly by his bed.

"Wal, I don't feel no draft anyway."

"You got enough blankets?"

"Sure." Pier stirred in the woolens. "Sure, I guess so."

She set the bed lamp down on the chair and leaned over him to tuck him in. "You got to be careful, you know. You were in a terrible storm an' you might a caught yer death a cold."

"Yeh." He felt his blood rising.

She leaned farther. Her arm touched his nose. The smell of her armpit was sweet. Her breast touched his face. It was as soft as a mound of pudding.

He pulled her down to him and rolled her between the blankets and stripped her of her nightgown and took her.

Later, when the bellowing had left his ears, he became aware that she had asked him a question. He listened.

She asked again, "Do you ever think of Nertha?"

In the clay-colored lamplight, he looked at her black, mischievous eyes. "Huh, out of eye, out of heart."

"Didn't you love her?"

"Sure. She was fine. Only I wisht we could a had more sons."

She looked at him for a moment. Then her eyes closed over a thought.

. 2 .

Three weeks later, when the great snows had melted away, as Pier was shoeing one of the gray fillies, Teo stepped into the barn door, and said, "Dad, somebody's here to see you."

Pier grunted. He was crouched over, with the rear leg of the horse caught between his knees. He looked up, his face swelling and reddening. "Who is it?"

"Kaia. She says she wants to see you."

"Who?" Pier's face reddened even more.

"Kaia. She's by the house. Waiting."

Pier dropped the leg. "Huh. Wonder what that gooseberry wants."

Teo's eyes bored into him. "I dunno. She just said she wanted to see you."

"All right. Here. Kin you finish shoein' her? I'll go see." Pier straightened up with a groan, stepped to the door. He put on his leather jacket. He stepped across the yard.

He found her on the front steps. "Hi. What kin I do for you?"

She smiled at him. She was very friendly. She was alive with an inward thought. "Oh, nothin'. I just thought I'd drop over to see how you was gettin' along. I ain't seen you since the night of the storm, you know."

"Yeh."

"I thought maybe you got sick. Or something."

"No. No. I'm all right."

She smiled to herself, got to her feet.

"Yeh. Wal, why don't you come in a minute?" he said at last. He opened the door for her. "An' have a cup a tea with me."

She stepped in ahead of him. Her face, cowled in a shawl, was comely.

He pulled up a chair for her, threw a handful of cobs into the stove. He set the water forward on the stove. "Did you walk over?"

"No. I caught a ride with the mailman."

"Oh." Pier sat down in his armchair.

They sat still for a moment. The water began to sizzle.

"Wal, what's up, Kaia? Stephan got into trouble again?" Pier tipped back on two legs.

"No. Not that. It's . . . something else." She looked down at the table, picking at the print in the oilcloth. Her blue stone rings tinkled. She drew her light coat up around her shoulders as if protecting herself against invisible drafts of air. "No. Not that. It's . . . well, Pier, you're going to be a father again."

Pier dropped his chair on all fours. His mouth popped open. "The hell you say."

She started at his noise, at his wild gesturing. She lowered her brows demurely. "Yes, Pier. I'm going to be a mother at last."

Pier stood up. "Y'u sure?" His eyes became abruptly bloodshot. "A son?"

She lifted her dark mink eyes and looked directly into his. "Yes."

Pier's mind went into a dance. "When?"

"In eight months or so, of course. You know that."

"Wal, I'll be cow-kicked over the moon!"

"Ain't you happy?"

"Happy? Woman, if you knew how much Nertha an' I . . . How much I've always wanted another boy. Another . . ." He stood over her, demanded, "Woman, tell me the truth. Are y'u sure? This ain't no fake?"

"It's the truth all right."

"Wal! Wal, that's wonderful. A son. Why, I didn't think I had it in me no more. Jumpin' Joseph."

She laughed, picked at the table. "You'll marry me then?"

"Marry you?" He paused. "Oh, that's right." His eyes widened. "A course I'll marry you. What do you think I am, a cowardly buck-nun? Besides, I can't let you run off with my champeen."

"Well, I didn't know," she murmured, smiling to herself.

"A course. C'mon. You set the date, an' we'll do her."

"Well, when do you want it?"

"Any time. Any time. Whenever you say. Today?"

"Well, I should get dressed first."

"How long will it take you to get yer Sunday duds on?"

"An hour or so."

"What about Stephan? You gonna leave him alone there?"

"Him? Oh, he'll be all right. He never noticed I was there anyway."

"All right. Good. I'll take you home in the old Buick first, then come back here and dress, an' then we'll go up to Rock Falls to get the license. An' after, get Old White Wings Himself to tie the knot. Okay?"

She nodded.

But when he had brought Kaia home and had come back on the yard to get dressed himself, he had misgivings. What about her sloppy ways: her dirty fingernails, her dunging canaries, her mop rags lying around? Even if Stephan had dragged her down she could have at least kept herself decent. Part of her was good old Frisian, out of Âlde Folkwâlda, and so surely there should be a streak of cleanliness in her. He wondered. Wal, maybe all she needed was a chance. Ae.

He stepped to the barn to tell Teo. But when he actually faced the boy, he weakened, and said instead, "Teo, Kaia wants me to take her to Rock Falls this afternoon. To get some stuff or so. I'll be home in time for chores."

"Okay, Dad." The boy's eyes searched his face.

"I'll try to be home early."

"Sure."

"You wasn't plannin' to use the car?"

Surprise opened Teo's eyes. "Who, me? No."

Pier looked at the ground. He pawed. He grinned sheepishly. "You know, Teo, sometimes I think Kaia likes me. I betcha if I was to ast her to marry me she'd do it."

Teo said nothing.

Pier shot Teo a look. "You got anything against her?"

"No."

"Do you think she would?"

"I really don't know."

"Do you like her?"

"Well, she's all right. Kind a nutty once in a while."

"Uh-huh."

"An' dirty. Probably a lot a fun, though."

Just in time Pier checked himself. "Wal, from what I've seen, that's what I'd say too."

Teo said nothing.

Pier waited for Teo to add something, standing first on one leg, then the other. At last, when the boy offered no further comment, Pier said, "Wal, I guess I better get along then."

Teo nodded and went back to the shoeing.

Pier dressed, nervous. He left the yard in a rush, picked up Kaia, went to Rock Falls.

They got the license. But, instead of Domeny Beckstrom, they sought out an aged, retired minister. It was Kaia's idea. They were married in a solemn room dominated by a heavy mahogany organ. He kissed her afterward, dry-lipped, excited, uneasy. On the way home he stopped to pick up her clothes and her canaries.

They drove on the yard.

Pier looked around anxiously for Teo. The boy was nowhere in sight.

Pier bustled her into the house, carrying in her suitcases and boxes and bird cages.

They were seated in the living room, Pier in a morris chair, Kaia in a rocker, when Teo stepped into the door of the kitchen, then stepped into the doorway facing them.

He glanced at them, stopped. "Hello," he said.

Pier laid aside his pipe, hove ponderously to his feet. "Teo, boy, I got some news for you."

"Oh?"

"Yeh. Y'u got a new ma."

"Huh?"

"You got a new ma. Kaia an' I got married today."

Teo stared. His face whitened. He tried to swallow, coughed.

"Wal, ain't you gonna wish us a happy weddin', boy?"

Kaia smiled sweetly too. "Sure, Teo, ain't you got a kiss fer yer new ma?"

Teo stood still a moment; then, without a word, turned stiffly and lumbered awkwardly out of the house.

· 3 ·

Kaia surprised Pier. She kept the house fairly neat. It wasn't as shining as Nertha had kept it, but it was passable. She aired out the sheets and blankets regularly. To clean clothes she drenched them in gasoline. She scrubbed the house from cellar to attic. She was even careful to keep her favorite canaries well back in a corner of the kitchen.

Her cooking was a delight. Pier had always liked Nertha's cooking, her spicing with herbs and drugs, but her dishes were pale compared to the savory soups, the aromatic salads, the lifted loaves of bread, the basted meats Kaia prepared for him. Even Teo, who had set his heart against her, relaxed a little after each meal.

Most startling, however, was Kaia's behavior in bed. Unlike Nertha, once the sheets were closed over them for the night, she always wanted to play awhile before going to sleep.

Often she began the love-making. Many times he awoke in the middle of the night to find her stroking his arms and his body, snuggling her bared pudding-soft breasts against his gaunt chest. She kept his manroots in a perpetual state of tumescence. Though forty and hair-white, he began to horse around like a young man.

Sometimes he wondered about her forthrightness, her craving for

him. He even worried about it. Red Joe had once said that a woman wanting to do it too often could be the death of a man. He watched himself to see if he were weakening.

Strangest of all was the odd way she behaved when they were riding the red waves together. She too seemed to have a convulsive moment at the end. She too seemed to wind up something, to tie up a knot like a man.

He mused. He wondered. Did other men's wives behave like that too? If they did, Nertha had been cheated.

When he awoke in the mornings he was pleased to find the old-time quickness in his legs again. He whistled as he worked. He sang. When the new shrieking siren blew up at noon, and at supper, and at curfew, he laughed it to scorn, braying the old bell songs at it as if by the very power of his leather lungs he could silence it. The moment he stepped in the house he turned on the radio. Within a week he had kissed Kaia in every corner of every room. He had Young Lysbeth, a sister of Young Maybelle, bred by Stephan's bull. The house and the yard rang with his exultant living.

When Ma Lysbeth and Âlde Folkwâlda, lonely for someone with similar peeves and prejudices, a little hard up and interested in saving all they could, decided to get married, Pier seconded it enthusiastically. He helped them settle in Ma Lysbeth's house.

April came, bringing infrequent showers. All through it he sang, whistled, dreamed of the son to come. He sowed grain, prepared a seedbed for the corn.

May came, bringing both hot dry days and gusto downpours. He sang, and planned the years to come. He planted corn.

Always and ever, and every day she demanded of him a loving. She drew upon him. She played. She had names for the things they did. She lulled him with soft talk, admiring his powers openly.

He fell in with her moods. He too began to make a game of the endless, nervous tumescent play.

Once, a lazy Sunday morning, a morning he always gave himself an extra hour of sleep, as she leaned over him, one of her breasts bulged up like a filling balloon, popped out of her nightgown. Deliberately she looked at him, smiling, her eyes black, inviting.

He laughed. He breathed unevenly. "Hey, you better tie up them puppies or they'll run away."

They laughed together.

Pier enjoyed the aromas of her body. At first he thought it evil, sinful, to enjoy them. But as the riotous days went by, his conscience relaxed. It wasn't long before he had no qualms at all. He carried them around in his mind when he worked on the yard, taking them out at his leisure, sniffing. He wondered if an awakened woman smelled the same to a man as a frisky heifer did to a nose-lifting bull.

He worked. He loved. He dreamed. He planned the spring months through. A son was coming again. Ae.

· 4 ·

But in the mind of Kaia, another story was unfolding.

She really enjoyed him the first month. In all of her experiences with men she had never encountered so vigorous a male as he. She had only to flash an eye or twist a shoulder, and he flamed. She used all the tricks she had learned as the village flirt, the flirt who had been first to show her knees, first to bob her hair, first to rouge her cheeks. The tricks always brought results. She knew she had him on the run.

But by the time the laving rains of early June came, she began to enjoy him less. She felt herself cooling toward him. What had once been passion was now amusement.

The more Kaia learned of Pier, the more she began to understand what had happened to Nertha. With the wisdom of an awakened woman, she knew instantly it had been Pier's fault that Nertha had been so nervous, that she had had miscarriages. In her own case, whenever Pier rushed her along too fast, she had to resort to a trick to make sure she tied her own convulsive knot the same time he tied his. Unless a woman knew this magic of the flame point, a hurrying man would ruin a woman, frustrate her.

The hasty Pier irked Kaia. Try as she might she could not get him to slow down, to take things in stride, to pace himself. In the beginning, when she had been still wild for his flesh, she had tried to teach him: with hints, with coy retreats, with murmurings. But he did not catch on. And presently, she only shrugged her shoulders and thought, "Well, if the man won't learn, that's his hard luck."

She changed her tactics a few times. Once she tried apathy. The moment she saw that the love-making was going to end futilely for her, she slackened, and slumped beside him.

Startled, Pier drew back as if he had been slapped.

She lay waiting in the dark, smiling to herself, wondering what Pier was thinking, hoping that he had learned a lesson.

Pier asked, "What's the matter?"

"Nothin'."

"Wal, there must be."

"Why?"

"You act funny."

"Oh."

"As if you didn't care no more."

She said nothing. She smiled to herself in the dim bedroom. She drew away from him cautiously, rolled over on her side, pretending sleep.

She felt Pier reach for her, try to roll her over.

She lay inert in his arms.

Pier shook her. "Do somethin'. Move somethin'. Set yer lips. Or somethin'. Grow under me."

She lay still. She thought: "Well, mister, treat me right, and I'll treat you right. You can't rush a woman."

As her arteries cooled, her eyes cleared. She began to have a distaste for the way the house was arranged. Carefully, unobtrusively, she took down all of Nertha's family pictures, replaced them with portraits of her own family: Âlde Folkwâlda, her gypsy grandmother Nala, her mother Marya, her dead father George, herself. She took down Nertha's religious saw THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF; put it carefully away in a trunk in the guest room along with Ma Lysbeth's GOD IS THE HEAD OF THIS HOUSE. She replaced the old bedclothes, the curtains, the doilies with new ones she charged at the Starum Mercantile. She did it slyly, smiling to herself, watching with sharp mink eyes for the least sign of resistance from him. Every time she made a change, she accompanied it with an aromatic heaping meal.

She was afraid of Teo. And she didn't like him. He had a way of looking directly at her for a fleeting second which unsettled her, which seemed to pierce to the very core of her. She could not read him. He was out of her reach. She saw that long ago Pier had forced the boy to hide his real thoughts from prying eyes. She made up her mind that within the year the boy would be gone.

She also kept a wary eye on Pier's finances, trying to figure out just how much he was worth. She baited him with supposed gossips.

Pier told her of his possessions, but that was all. He never mentioned debts.

She sat back in her mind, waiting, watching, eying him, letting things drift on.

Pier continued to rush.

She let him roar on.

More and more often she lay limp beneath him, inert, unappealing, flat.

She wondered when he would awaken.

She prepared for the day when his eyes would open coolly and clearly upon her.

She sat back, letting him dig his own grave, letting him run out the string of her impatience.

If he learned, well and good. If he did not, she would get what she could from him, and leave him.

Like Nertha, she was a woman, she was of the earth, and she had to be treated right.

2. THE SUMMER ANGER

. 1 .

THEN CAME THE MOST SINGULAR SUMMER PIER HAD ever seen.

A hint of it appeared on the ninth of June when a series of violent wind squalls churned across the Big Sioux country. The wind clouds were dark, hung low; and at noon hour, they turned the day into massive night. The combing wind ripped up trees and telephone poles, upset buildings, tore out young growing sprouts of corn.

Later, the sky calmed, and again the grain flourished, and the corn shot up, and normal rain fell regularly.

On the morning of the twenty-fifth, down came a burning heat. Pier sweat as he ate his breakfast: a bowl of cool milk and cornflakes.

He sweltered as he bibbered his drink: a lemon in sweet cool cistern water.

At lunchtime his overall and shirt and shoes were sopping wet. His skin prickled from the heat. He scratched. A million nervous ants were digging into him.

Horses puffed. Pier drove them slowly, sometimes stopped to rest them in the middle of the field. Great rivulets of salty, yellow sweat stained their furry hides, ran down their backs and rumps. Dust rising from beneath the cultivators, where the earth was being rent by clover-leaf shovels, clung to horse and man like a mass of brown bees.

Pier almost choked on the hot noon meal Kaia served. He was being melted down by two heats: one from within, one from without.

He contemplated making home-brew beer; its sour, brisk taste made a good thirst quencher.

The sun was a gory red monster. In the morning it leapt all bloody from the dawn's horizon; in the evening it skulked behind the Hills of the Lord. The sun was the flaming center of an angry boil in the sky.

The burning air hugged the land, drying out the skin of all living things. Animals and plants and men panted.

Pier tossed on his damp bed. Sweat trickled down his chest and belly. It tickled, kept him awake. When he did fall asleep at last, his body worked at sleeping, his breath came laboredly. When he awoke in the morning, he found his silhouette etched in sweat on the sheets.

The second day, the third day, the fourth day, the fifth day, all came hot. Corn curled up. Grain began to burn, turned a hot gold hue. Pastures yellowed. Leaves began to fall from trees. Gardens crispened. Fruits dried on twigs.

Day after day the heat held on, remorselessly, relentlessly. The panting animals and plants and men thinned.

Clouds came. And though heavy rains fell, piercing the envelope of heat lying on the loess, they only helped to fry faster the tender fleshes of life.

Most rains dried up before the falling drops could near the earth. Only hailstones the size of apples, falling with terrific speed from the upper cloud levels, could reach it. The smaller stones melted and evaporated, vanished.

The well dried again. Pier had to send his cattle through the county land to the Big Sioux, now but a trickle.

The wooden spokes of wagon wheels dried, and shrank, and rattled in their sockets. Sometimes, going down the road with a load of grain, the steel rims rolled off, and the wheels collapsed, and the grain spilled on the road. To use the wheels again, Pier had to assemble them and drop them into a tank of water or deep into a Big Sioux pool.

A mile-high layer of heat pressed on the earth. The nights became as hot as the days.

The subsoil dried. Underground streams dried up. Springs spurted for the last time. Hidden pools in water-tunneled caverns and subterranean lakes, once full with pressing, bubbling floods, lay empty. The walls of the vast dungeon rooms cracked. They crumbled. They fell. The buried caverns boomed with the sound of gongs bom-bomming bells in gloomy cathedrals. Clay spilled, subsoil gravels sprinkled, and then the surface loess fell, gave way too.

One morning Pier stood gaping out of the pantry window; the privy had vanished in the night. At first he thought it a Hallowe'en prank played out of season. But when he stalked outdoors, stepped up over the old drift by the box elder, he found that the ground had given away beneath the privy. The little structure had plunged into the wound. Looking over the slipping edge of the hole, he could dimly see the square outlines of the shingles. He backed away from it, frightened to his soul, breathing hard.

He recalled Âlde Romke's stories of Fryslân. The ancient land had sunk away in a great collapse; until at last the Frisians had been overwhelmed by the inrushing waves of the North Sea. Was this American land falling down too? Would it too be flooded by a sea of mountainous water, this time from the Gulf? Pier leaned against the house, shaken. If the hole before him spread, if it became a crater, it would swallow his house.

One of these fine mornings sea herrings would appear in the wells, swimming in under the hollowed-out subsoils, just as they once had in Âld Fryslân. Some morning Kaia would pump up salt water. Pier half expected to hear a hollow voice craking dolefully out of the pit, telling him to flee the land, just as a woman in the Old Country had

once heard a hoarse voice cry, a month before the North Sea deluge, "Flechtsje it lân út!"

The next morning he found another fallen cavern, this time in the pasture.

Later, he found still other pits: one in the low hills west of the grove, one in the slope east of the house.

The cattle began to suffer. Small calves died. The long yearlings lowed. Old cows faltered, died.

Ol' Spit Triggs declined to get the dead animals; his rendering works couldn't handle the sudden upsurge in business.

Pier threw the gaunt hulks into the new holes, stomped on the sides, watched the miniature landslides bury them in an instant.

The holes sickened him. The earth looked like a creature half eaten by maggots.

Morning, noon, and night, all day, all night, the brassy sky glowed.

Pier wore a handkerchief over his nose and mouth to keep the dry flaming air from burning his lungs.

Hawks and vultures lay on the wing, hunting carrion.

To take advantage of a brilliant moon and to escape the hot daytime, Pier decided to cultivate at night. With Teo on the double-row, driving the four young grays, Betts and Belle and Young Maid and Young Mell, and himself on the single-row, driving the aged Maid and Mell, they struggled on. They dodged black holes. Daringly they worked on the crumbling, dissolving, treacherous earth. The dark caravan of men, horses, and machines moved silently down the long green rows of dying corn.

The corn leaves unfurled a little in the soft air of midnight, opening hungry faces to the stars. Driving through the mass of corn in the shadowy night was a voyaging on a sea of plumy green. In the glittering light of the moon, the waving leaves rustled with mystery.

Pier and Teo talked little as they worked. The boy had become very silent the last days. He was like a deaf-mute working a treadmill.

Pier came to the north end of the field. He got off his seat, walked around a few steps, stretched, reached down to pull a few weeds the cultivators had missed, climbed back onto his seat.

Beyond and below lay Blood Run Creek, dry now in its gaunt banks. In the silent night, the sound of the shovels clanking against the cultivator wheels, the hoarse whisseling of the breathing horses, the hissing of his own breath, seemed parts of a bad dream. Pier said, half to himself, half to the boy, "You know, Teo, livin' on this bald-headed prairie, in plain sight of the sun an' the moon, is hell on earth."

Teo mumbled.

"Huh? I didn't hear you."

Teo was silent.

Pier hawked, and spat. "Why, the air's so damned thirsty, it dries up the spit before it hits the ground."

Teo asked suddenly, "Why tell me about it?"

Pier shifted in his seat. He stood up a moment to let the air through the cloth on his buttocks, sat down again. "Wal, you don't have to bite off my ears. I'm just talkin' out loud, is all."

Teo mumbled again.

"Huh?" Pier glanced at his son. The boy's silhouette protruded blackly sharp above the night's west horizon. "Wal, as for me, I know this much: I ain't quittin' farmin'."

"That's what I was afraid of."

Pier glanced at Teo again. "Huh. You don't really think I'd quit, do you?"

"Well, I was kind of hopin' you'd wake up."

"Wake up to what?"

"Aw . . . skip it."

"No, tell me."

"Naw. If you still don't know it, there's no use me tellin' you."

"Why, you act as if you think a man's dumb to farm!"

Teo snorted. "He is."

"Oho. At last it's out. So."

"Well, are you satisfied with the life you've had?"

Pier quieted. He mused to himself. With both their tempers at short ends in this heat, they might get into a foolish fight. "Wal, you could be right, you could be wrong. At any rate, let's get back to our cultivatin'. C'mon, boys, girls, get up. Giddap. Glucht! Glickt!"

The horses hesitated, as if they were hoping they had not heard his voice.

"C'mon, Maid, Mell. Get a move on now. Glickt."

Mell trembled, wavered. Then Maid leaned against her collar and Mell fell in step with her. The traces tightened, the steel evener screamed, the shovels spurted lumpy, dry earth. The horses' thigh muscles, though tired, rippled with power. The horses panted. They dragged Pier and the plow along.

The draw chains tinkled in the eerie night. Life was topsy-turvy. The moonlight was like daylight filtered through smoked glass.

Pier felt uneasy. His face and hands and navel and buttocks were sticky with viscous sweat.

Mell fell with a crumpling sound. Maid moved on a step farther, stopped. The cultivator veered. Bending iron howled, anguished.

"Whoa!" Pier shouted. Out of the corner of his eye, Pier saw Teo's horses stop instantly too, saw the boy slide forward in his seat.

Pier slipped off and ran around the cultivator, squatted beside Mell. Her eyes were dazed, her breath came irregularly. She was like a woman swooned.

Teo rushed up, stumbling long-legged over the hard lumpy land, his arms flailing the young green cornstalks. "What's up?"

Pier said nothing.

Teo squatted too. He looked; then muttered, "Well, there goes the best lead horse in the county."

"Yeh." Pier shook the horse's head.

"Won't do no good, Dad. She's a dead duck."

Pier commanded, his voice hoarse, "Loosen up her harness there. Hurry."

Teo hurried. Maid had begun to snort nervously. He petted her.

"Hurry!"

"Dammit, I am."

"Wal."

"Don't get so excited. It's no use anyway."

Pier bent over Mell. He felt her going. The exhausted horse sighed hugely, sighed again, fell slack.

Pier stood up.

Teo towered beside him. "There was a horse who had more brains than most men. An' now she's only filler for another hole."

Pier turned away. He wiped his brow. He shivered in the hot night. The safe ground he had been standing on was crumbling away.

. 2 .

The first days of August came and still the hardhearted sun rose at dawn breathing fire. The land burned beneath its pitiless glare.

On the fortieth morning Pier knew his crops were shot to hell: the corn completely burnt out, the oats, what was left of it, shriveled and too short to cut. Sometimes a weak wind ran down the corn rows, and rattled the crisp leaves, and rasped them one against the other.

Only one hope was left for the year. There was yet the fruit of the woman Kaia, a son. Ae. The unborn boy still made life worth while. Only for him would he try to bring the cattle and horses and chickens through the coming fall and winter, have them in shape for the work next spring. For the boy. Ae. Thank God the sun couldn't reach into Kaia's belly to shrivel him up.

Early in the day, to take advantage of the morning hours, when the heat was still tolerable, Pier took a wagonful of five-gallon cans to the river to fetch water for the hogs and chickens.

All the forenoon long, as he sweated in the inhuman blaze of the summer burning, he dreamed about his new son. He hoped it would take after himself, or Âlde Romke, or, if it had to be, Âlde Folkwâlda, but certainly not dark Kaia. Already he could see the tousled wheat hair of the lad, his blue eyes, his quick laughing ways. The new boy would be his son, and not the machine's, as Teo had become. The boy would learn farming, would learn breeding, land lore. The new son would be his very own. Ae. It was a good thing, now that the oldest was about to fly away, that a new eaglet was coming into the family.

Boots on, Pier stood in the pale, riffling Big Sioux, scooping up water into a pail with a long sweeping motion. Water sloshed in the five-gallon cans on the wagon.

Betts and Belle, the young gray mares, stood slapping their legs and backs with swishing tails, ceaselessly trying to rid themselves of needling flies. Sometimes they leaned over to drink of the mossy water, sometimes they stood resting.

Pier stopped to catch his breath. He listened to the summer sounds. Beneath the shade of the massive elms and cottonwoods, at the water's

edge, living was sufferable. Cicadas chirred above him in the thinly leaved trees. A crow circled overhead. Far to the south, around and around, lower and lower, a hawk turned in lazy spirals.

Pier lighted his burnt-down corncob pipe. He puffed slowly. He shrugged, heard sweat drops splatter into the water below. His back ached under the right shoulder blade and he turned his right arm slowly in its socket. The grinding of bone in bone was pleasant.

He mused, seeing his new son walking through the days ahead. He imagined himself buying the boy new clothes, buying him a Western pony, buying him a new cultivator.

At last, his pipe empty, he clapped out the ashes on the steel rim of a wagon wheel, went back to pailing again. Steadily the water mounted in the cans. The horses switched and stamped. The insects buzzed near his ears.

He finished, started for home. He drove carefully up the back-country lane, avoiding the new gaping holes in the earth. He entered the barnyard, began to unload. He brought three cans to the chickens.

He unhitched the horses, stalled them, fed them for the noon hour.

As he came up from the barn, he saw Kaia passing from the privy to the house. His pulse leaped. How slim she was. How swift her toes. How the bull in him got to its feet when she passed by.

He looked at her closely. Even at forty she was as slim as a gypsy, as an Indian maiden.

How odd she didn't show. Most women looked like bloated cucumbers at the end of six months. But Kaia, why, she was as slim as an April willow.

Pier met her at the porch door. For an instant a frown crossed her brows.

He put his arm around her. "How's my spareribs today?" He smiled, shook her playfully.

"Well," she said, sweeping back hair from her sweaty forehead, "I'm plain hot."

"An' a little crabby too?"

She drew away from him, stepped into the porch ahead of him.

"What's a matter, girl, get out a bed on the wrong side this mornin'?"

"No."

"Well, what is it then?"

"I wish that son a yours wouldn't always make such a mess in his room. I spent the whole mornin' cleanin' up after him."

Pier sat down in his armchair. He sighed. A happy mood had been squelched. He wiped his brow. "Yeh, I know. But then, that's Teo. There's no changin' him now."

Kaia muttered. She wore a braided leather belt around her middle and she tightened it. Her bare arms flashed like polished copper.

Pier looked at a sore on his finger. He had barked it while closing the pasture gate.

Kaia said, "You men. Always gettin' sores. I ain't never seen a man yet but what he didn't have a sore somewheres. Why don't you wear gloves?"

Pier looked up with narrowing, gray brows. "Land alive, you sure are full a the hex today, ain't y'u?"

"Well, why don't you?" She set a bowl of steaming potatoes on the table.

At the sight of the rising steam, Pier winced. "Wal, sheeks, heek, mittens cost too much. Say, must we have hot food on a day like this?"

She ignored his question. "I suppose it's cheaper to get blood poison?"

Pier tried to laugh. "Aw, woman, didn't you know it was cheaper to grow skin than buy it?"

"Och! You men."

Pier grinned. "Och. You wimmen."

Kaia turned away, busied herself on the stove. "Where's Teo?"

"Out t'Red Joe's. Helpin' him."

She whirled around. "Why ain't I told such things? Here I went and prepared for him too."

"Judas Priest, woman, you sure got yer talkin' pants on today, ain't you? If you don't cool off, I'll have to throw you in the cistern."

She humphed and went outdoors.

Pier heard her open the cellar door, heard her go down the steps, heard her rustling in the cellar. She sounded like a hungry, nosing mouse. Then he heard her shouting.

"What?" he called.

Vaguely her voice came to him from beneath the floor.

"What?"

Then it came clear. "Will you come down here an' reach me one of them pickle jars?"

"Yeh."

But Pier did not move right away and in an instant her voice sounded up loudly again. "Pier!"

"Yeh, yeh. Hold yer horses. I'll be there in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

"Well, come then."

"I am, woman."

He went down. He reached up underneath the stringers in a dark corner just below the living room, found the jar, handed it to her, wordless. He followed her up the cellar steps. Again her swinging hips stirred him. He reached out and put his hands on her thighs. He drew her down a step. He tried to kiss her.

"Don't." She pulled away from him.

"Oh, now, come, can't a man chase up his wife a little?"

She turned her face away.

"Hey, what's louse?"

"Nothing."

Pier held her firm against him, placing his hand over her belly. It felt strangely flat and hard. "You know," he blurted suddenly, "for a woman that's about six months gone, you sure hold yer figger."

She flashed her eyes at him, looked away. "If you know how, it's easy. As easy as eatin' pie."

"Must be," Pier said, withdrawing, and following her up the rest of the steps and closing the outdoor cellar lid after them. "Ye're doin' it." He mused, shook his head. "Sure is funny. Never seen a woman so far gone look so flat."

"Oh, shut up."

They stepped onto the porch and into the kitchen again. Pier sat down heavily in his armchair by the west window. His sweaty trousers stuck to his knee and he pulled it loose.

The clock ticked loudly on the shelf over the sink. Water dripped from the cistern pump. The stove throbbed with heat.

"I sure wish you'd get me a kerosene stove," she said, still puttering over the range. "This stove makes the house hotter'n all get out."

"Wal, we just ain't got the money just now, Kaia. Later, maybe."

"Huh, after I'm dead an' gone, I suppose."

Pier hid his face behind his wide hand. "Oh, woman, don't whine so. An' get the grub on the table."

"A kerosene stove would sure go nice. I'd put it on the porch, an' keep the house cool."

"Oh, shut up."

She jumped as if hit with a whip. She turned. Pier could feel her stare at him.

One of the canaries in a cage peeped weakly for a second; then, as if the heat were too much for it, sank back noiselessly again, letting its wings open to the air a little.

"Wal, is the grub ready?"

Kaia murmured to herself. She set out a few more bowls of steaming food, then drew up a chair.

With a sigh, and heave, Pier dragged his armchair up to the table too.

They ate wordlessly. The sound of the smacking was loud in the bare-walled kitchen.

Dinner eaten, Pier went into the living room, pulled down the buff shades, took off his shoes, settled on the leather horsehair sofa for a nap. He stretched out his limbs luxuriously. He pulled his sweaty clothes free of his skin. The noon meal lay warmly and loosely in his belly. He slept.

When he awoke, his first thought was of Kaia. Sleep had rested him, had awakened desire. He stretched and yawned. He wondered where she was. It was still in the room. The sun on the south buff shades threw a bronze glow upon the table and chairs.

Then he heard someone breathing. He listened. Huh, he thought, Kaia must have laid down too. Probably napping in the bedroom.

Again he wondered if he should pursue her. He toyed with the idea. He smiled to himself. But, at last, he resolutely put the temptation behind him. Ae. Get thee behind me, Âlde Han, she is too far gone with child for such foolishness.

With a start he recalled that only a week ago she had taken him. He shook his head, puzzled. He swung his feet to the floor.

He looked at his shoes, stretched, and then, glancing through the open door of the bedroom, saw Kaia lying naked on the bed. He stood up and, curious, stepped to the door. He stared at her. He stared at her pudding-soft breasts, at the gathering of hair between her thighs. He trembled.

He saw her eyes. In the dim light of the bedroom he had not noticed them before. They were glittering at him like the eyes of a skulking creature. Pier drew back.

"Take a good look while ye're at it," she said curtly.

Pier snapped his jaws to, looked to one side. He reddened. Quickly his mind twisted on itself, came up with a way to throw the burden of talk onto her. "You know, I still can't figger out why you don't show."

She blinked. She stared directly at him. "Maybe I ain't gonna have a baby. Did you ever think of that?"

"Aw, now don't make me laugh."

"Well, I ain't." Still her eye held his. She was a claw-sure cat.

Pier straightened. "Woman, talk clear. I don't think I heard you right."

"I think you heard me plenty good."

The bowels in his belly stirred. He sat down suddenly. "Come again?"

She showed her teeth.

He put his hand out to touch her.

She drew away instantly, and his hand fell on the sheet.

"Look, woman, if you don't want me to look at you, cover yerself up with somethin'."

"It's too hot."

"Judas Priest, woman, what's got into you all of a sudden?"

"Nothin'."

He sat wordless for a moment. He said finally, "You was only talkin' a course, wasn't you?" He tried to smile.

"About what?"

"About the boy."

"No, I wasn't."

"You mean you really ain't gonna have him?"

She laughed. "No."

"But you said . . . you said last spring . . . why, that's why I married you."

"An' not fer love then?" she smirked.

"Why a course I did it fer love. Course."

She looked at him, still laughing mockingly.

Pier looked down. His white hair slid forward a little over his wrinkled, bronzed forehead. Slowly his right fist gathered up a handful of bedclothes. It twisted around. "Look, woman. I ain't much fer jokes. Talk clear. Tell me again. Are you gonna have that boy?"

"No."

Pier stood up, whitening. "You lied last spring?"

Her eyes opened at his sudden movement. She did not answer.

"Did you?"

"What do you think?"

"You lied?"

"Of course I lied. I don't get babies. Not me. I take a simple fer that. An herb."

Blood returned to Pier's face with a rush. His nostrils quivered. His eyes widened wrathfully. His face filled with a terrible torment. He leaned over her, his lean veined fists clawing the air directly above her breasts, as if he intended to rip them from her. "Woman, why did you marry me then?"

"Fer yer money. What else?"

"Money?" His nostrils fluttered.

"Sure."

"Money?"

"Sure. I was tired a livin' with Stephan. I wanted a man, an' I wanted a home."

Pier's great fists opened; shut. He gestured violently.

She shrank from him; quickly covered herself with a loose sheet. Her eyes contracted with fear.

Pier reached forward.

She whipped her body out of his reach, leaped out of bed on the other side, and, shivering, pressed against the wall. "What're you gonna do?" she whispered.

"Woman . . . woman . . ." Then, not trusting himself, he turned and whirled out of the bedroom and picked up his shoes by the sofa and went out on the porch steps and snapped on his shoes and rushed out across the yard. His white bared head felt hot beneath the down-burning sun and throbbed wildly and he could feel the vast fearsome mouth breathing on his neck again and his mouth was full of ashes.

He heard a sound behind him and, turning, saw Teo driving on the yard with the rattling hayrack. When Teo stopped near the crib, Pier, out of habit, not knowing what he was doing, went over and started to unhitch and said nothing. He stumbled a little as he walked in front of the horses Betts and Belle.

"What's the matter, Dad? Heat finally gettin' you?"

Pier mumbled.

Teo's eyes continued to drill into him from the rack above. "Dad. Why, you've got sunstroke!"

"I'm all right," Pier said. He bore down on a thought. "Did you finish at Red Joe's?"

"Yeh."

"Good."

Teo slid down off the hayrack, tugged at the suspenders over his sweaty, youthful shoulders, looked at Pier once more, and without further word, began to unhitch the horses too.

Teo led the horses across the yard to the water tank by the well.

Pier followed, blindly.

The horses leaned over, slupped hungrily at the few inches of water in the bottom of the tank.

Pier stood behind them, blinking, dazed. He fumbled with the harnesses. He straightened a tug. Then, before he could stop himself, he blurted, "Teo, I'm afraid I married me a . . ." He caught himself. Feverishly he tugged at a straggling line.

Teo started.

But the words, like captured blackbirds wild for freedom, struggled to get out. They flew up. "Teo, my boy, I married me a whore."

Teo's eyes popped open; then quickly half closed in shame for his father.

Pier struggled to keep his voice even, steady. He bit his tongue. But the torment in him had the power of a volcano. "Yeh, Teo, a whore. A one hundred per cent whore."

Teo lowered his head even more.

"Hexed by a whore. What do you think of your pa now?"

"Oh, Dad, don't be nuts."

"A whore. A whore, d'y'understand? An' that, after yer wonderful mother Nertha. A dirty bitch-whore who married me fer my money." Pier hid his face on Betts's shoulder. He was so filled with humiliation, with futility, his knees sagged. He clung to the hame of the harness. The horse moved a step beneath his weight, continued to drink. Salty sweat smells rose from her gray furry hide. The harness leather reeked with it.

Teo's clumsy hand touched his shoulder; withdrew. "Now, Dad, don't get excited. I . . ."

The boy's touch was electric. It made Pier shiver. An impulse to tell, confess, to let himself have the diarrhea of the jawbone, seized him. He fought it. He closed his eyes tightly, trying to pinch, to push the truth he knew and hated down into the black cellar of his mind.

"Dad, look. I . . ." The boy touched him again.

Pier shuddered. "Teo, it was last spring. We sinned. An' then she came an' told me she was gonna have a baby. An' you know how I always wanted another brother fer you. Another boy. So I married her. What else? Wal, now the sting-tail bitch tells me she ain't gonna have a baby, never was gonna have a baby. Says she don't get babies because she uses a simple, an herb. Just think, boy, she kills little boys!" He sucked for breath. "Teo, boy, I got caught by a piece a crow bait. Imagine. Me. Your father. Pier Frixen."

"When'd she tell you all this?"

"Now. Just this minute."

"Now, Dad, take it easy. We . . ."

Suddenly Pier's mind began to turn and then it whirled and then it lost its light and he felt himself fading out. Out.

When he came to, he was lying on straw in the alley of the barn. Over his face lay Teo's jacket. Then he remembered and he wished he had never awakened.

After a while he roused himself and stood up and walked out of the barn and went west toward the river.

Out West. Ae. Out West. Where the men are men, and the women jewels, and the plumbing is outdoors.

· 3 ·

On the fiftieth successive day the sun still came up bloat-red, still continued to brand the soft fleshes of the earth. It climbed the forenoon skies, mercilessly scorched the growing things. It descended the long hill of the afternoon, implacably baked the gentle loesses.

They were having a cup of tea before supper, a custom immemorial in the Frixen family. Pier sat tight to his armchair by the stove, on two legs, trying to act as if there were no fearsome festering sore within him. Kaia was by the stove, nagging. Teo sat silent at his end of the table, wordless, and for once without a book.

Teo set down his cup. "Dad, I've decided to go to college this fall."

Pier came down on all fours. His teacup jingled in the saucer. "Now what?"

"That's right." Teo looked at his cup, as if he didn't dare look into Pier's white blazing eyes.

"Ye're leavin' me sit it out here alone then?"

"Well, no, not that. It's just that I want to go to school. Learn something. Get somewhere. I ain't gettin' nowhere fast out here."

Pier swallowed more tea, nervously filled his burnt-black corncob pipe. He leaned back on two legs again. "So, ye're gonna let me do all the work alone."

"Well, Dad, the way I figure it, there ain't enough work here to keep two men busy."

"Horse collar. There's plenty a work."

"Where? I don't see it. All we're doin' here is gettin' in each other's way."

Pier wiped his forehead with a red handkerchief. He wished Kaia would step out a minute. He wanted to turn his mind full on Teo. "Not busy, huh? Why, we're so busy here we ain't got time to take off our socks before we go to bed. You gotta rush, rush, rush, all the time."

"Aw, Dad, you know that's not true."

"But it is. Maybe this year we ain't been so busy. But that's because we didn't get no normal year this year."

"Normal year. What's a normal year?" Teo asked, sneering, his green-blue eyes for a moment holding Pier's.

"Wal, it's when we have lots a corn an' oats, forty, fifty bushels an acre, good prices, so on. You know that."

Teo leaned forward, wagging a calloused finger at him. "Dad, when are you ever gonna learn that the normal crops you talk about are exceptions? Dad, let me tell you something once. The normal around this part of the country is this blazing incinerator we're livin' in right now."

"Now, boy, be reasonable. Just because things went wrong this year, ain't no sign——"

Teo interrupted. "Dad, I am reasonable. But it's you who ain't. Have you ever really looked into things to see how they really are? Look. What kind a animals do you find livin' around here?"

"Wal, a course, cows. An' fine Frisian-Holsteins they are too."

"No, no, I don't mean them. I mean the wild animals, the natural critters that was livin' here when the white man came. The gopher, the prairie dog, jack rabbit, and coyote."

"What about 'em?"

"Dad, don't you see that all them animals, the buffaloes an' antelope an' the Indian an' his horses, all them critters, they could run? They could run miles, acrost a state in a night if they wanted to. An' sometimes they did. When they felt a drought coming, they moved. They moved to where it was rainin', to where it was fresh with green grass, where they could make a livin'."

"Huh."

"An' the plants. Have you ever looked at them? Really looked?"

"I suppose they could run too, huh?"

"No, but they did what amounts to the same thing. They went into hiding. The buffalo grass, the bluestem, they hid down in their roots, in their seeds. Why do you suppose there's no trees around here nowheres except along the river bottoms? Because on the prairies they couldn't move fast enough to get to where it was wet. They had to stick by the streams and the low spots."

"Aw, hell, kid, don't give me that crap. Where there's bluestem growin', there you got good corn country."

"I'm sorry, Dad, but it happens that just ain't so. That's a lot a plain ordinary housewife gossip, that's what that is."

"Are you tryin' to say that Grampa Romke an' I ha' been wastin' our time here all these years? That we gotta fly the country like the cottontails?"

"I'm sayin' you've tackled the land wrong. Unless you learn what your land is like, make yourself fit the land and not the land fit you, you'll die out like the trees. Like them maples and cottonwoods there in the grove, deader'n Indian skeletons."

Pier drew up his chair to the table. For a few moments he watched Kaia set out the food on the table. He glanced at her to see if she were listening. He said at last, "Aw, boy, ain't you gettin' off the reservation a bit now?"

Teo's eyes smoked up with furious argument. He looked directly at him. "Dad, the trouble with you is, you keep picking things up by the heavy end."

"Oh? How so?"

"You never stop to think things out. You rush into things too much. You figure everything's got to be done in a hurry. By bullin' it through. Maybe that was all right in old pioneer days. But not now."

Kaia set down a bowl of potatoes. "You can say that again."

Pier boiled up. "Now look, woman, you keep out a this."

"It's true," she said again, picking up a spatula and waving it at him.

"Woman, hold yer tongue. Or, as sure as God made little apples, I'll give you a Satan's forkbite in the backside such as you won't forget till yer dyin' day."

"Try it." She hunched up her arms on her hips.

With great effort, Pier contained himself. He turned to Teo, his white mane rising a little. "Boy, I've worked all these years for you. Just you. Not for a single anybody else. I've dreamt, sweat, slaved, so that someday you could have something. An' if you go now, you'll be takin' everything I have along with you."

Kaia watched him a moment, turned back to the stove.

Teo picked at the tablecloth. His lower lip thickened a little. "Well, a course, if you put it that way . . ."

One of the canaries opened an eye, roused a little, peeped, subsided again, sweating in its yellow feathers.

Pier slowly collected bits of flying anger and grief within himself, buried them in his mind's cellar, deliberately lowered his voice. "Where do you plan to go to college, if you go?"

"Sioux Falls. They got a mechanic's school there."

"Where would you get the money?"

"I'll work my way through. Work in a garage somewheres. Or where they got machines."

"Huh."

Teo drank the last of his tea and said, "Yes, Dad, I'm afraid I've got to go."

"An' what if I don't let you?"

"Well, then I . . ."

"Huh?"

Kaia turned once more. "Aw, let the kid go."

Pier suddenly kicked a chair standing before him across the room. It crashed against the sink and collapsed into a pile of splintered,

raw-opened wood. He cursed. "Woman, goddammit, how many times must I tell you to shut up?"

Teo stood up. He shook his head. "I sure wish you two would cut out the fightin'. This ain't home no more."

Pier snapped, "I don't like bein' interrupted."

Teo sniffed, looked at his feet; then clapped on his straw hat, walked outdoors.

Kaia snickered.

Pier popped up from his chair, rolled up his fist, held it over her, contained himself again, went outdoors too.

He hurried. He saw the boy heading for the barn. "Teo. Wait up."

Teo stopped, half turning, glancing at him from underneath the flapping brim of his straw hat.

"Ye're bound an' determined to go?"

"Yeh."

Pier had a fleeting picture of the kind of life the boy might lead. At least the boy would be free of Kaia, of her nagging tongue, her sneering eyes. "Wal, in a way I can't half blame you."

Teo's eyes lighted. They glowed up as brightly green as the eyes of Nertha, the day he had brought her here, to this new home, this farm. "Then I kin really go?"

Pier kicked at the dried, gray, grassless yard silt. "Boy, I just wonder, do you realize how much time an' money I've put into you? You'll never be able to pay it back, you know."

"Why pay it then?"

Pier started, righted himself, repeated, "You'll never be able to pay it back."

"I'll pay it back to my kids then, Dad."

Again Pier jumped.

"I kin really go then, Dad?"

"I dunno. I've got to think about it some more." Pier sighed. "Huh, they always say: 'When yer boy is young, he breaks yer tools; when he grows up, he tramples yer heart,' an' they're right."

"Oh, now, Dad, you know that ain't true."

"I never believed an apple fell far from a tree. But in yer case, I guess it will."

· 4 ·

On the sixtieth successive morning the sun still came up consuming and raging and violent. A few rains fell, normal rains, but, like hell with a cup of water thrown at it, the cruel flames only leaped higher.

After a nap, Pier staggered out on the ash-gray yard, rubbing his eyes. With an effort he remembered that he had cut down some stiff twiggy brome grass, that this afternoon he was to haul it in.

He looked at the hayrack, found that the wheels needed greasing. He went to the tool shed.

He discovered Teo deep in the dark back of it. The boy jumped when his shadow filled the door, quickly hid something he was working on. Pier glanced at him briefly, picked up the pail of heavy axle grease, stepped out again. He greased the two front axles, dabbing the heavy shaft with the black lard-thick mixture.

He was about to unscrew the cap of a rear wheel when he noticed a nail in the wood beneath the steel rim. He examined the entire wheel, found four more. He fired inside. That damned kid. He propped up the axle, took off the ponderous, chest-high wheel, rolled it to the tool shed.

Again Teo jumped when he appeared in the door.

Pier demanded, "Did you do this job?"

Teo slowly shuffled his long legs to the door. He looked. "Yeh."

"My God, Teo, you must a had a hole in yer head when you did this."

Teo flushed.

"What the hell got into y'u to do a bum-poor job like this? I thought you was a mechanic."

"I am."

"How come this then?"

"I was in a hurry."

"Aha! An' who was talkin' about bein' in a hurry the other day?"

"Well, this is different. This is only once. You're that way all the time."

Pier shook the wheel beneath the boy's chin. His voice harshed like gravel chewing stone. "Teo, I got a half a notion to give you a good swift kick in the ass."

"Go ahead."

"You north end of a southbound horse."

Teo towered up. "Why don't you call me a horse's patoot straight out? Or don't you dare?"

The muscles on Pier's arm flicked. "By the way, what was you doin' in back there?"

Teo blocked his way.

Pier shoved the boy roughly aside. "Damn you, what're you tryin' to do, keep yer father out a his own tool shed?"

"You keep out a here."

Pier bungled through the shop. Iron curlings, soiled wood chips, span-news, broken bolts, screws, bent nails, torn bits of leather, sawed-off strap irons strewed the dirt floor. Pier leaned forward to see better, saw a small wooden box. With hot needles, Teo had been burning a swirling design on its lid. "What the hell is this?"

Teo jumped against him, snatched at it.

They struggled a moment; then the box shattered in their heavy fingers.

Teo looked at the fragments, hurled them on the ground, snarled, half crying, half raging. "Still bullin' yer way through things, ain't you?"

Pier's mind whirled once, shot through an opening. "Ha. So ye've got a girl, huh? Makin' a toy hope chest fer a girl."

"What do you think, we young ones don't grow up too?"

"Ha. So you've taken to chasin' jail bait around, botherin' some little sage hen somewheres, huh? Why, you little johnny-come-lately shorthorn, you ain't even dry behind the ears yet, let alone ready to foolish a woman."

Teo reddened, said nothing.

"Fixin' a doodad. Ha." Pier gestured. "Say, didn't I tell you at breakfast this morning you was to haul manure today?"

"Yeh."

"Wal?"

"It's too hot. Besides, I had to get this done first."

Pier stood on his toes. "Teo, damn you, when I told you to haul manure, I meant haul manure. Now, march, get, go."

Teo reached down, picked up the fragments of the box, and reluctantly started for the door, carrying them with him.

"Put that down."

Glancing at him half fearfully, half contemptuously, Teo threw the pieces on the dusty bench. He stepped out onto the yard, started for the barn, dragging his steps.

The boy went so slowly, Pier maddened. He burst through the door after him, his fist lifted, ready to strike.

Teo looked over his shoulder, stepped faster.

Pier followed, marching after him step for step, charging up explosive wrath. It was only with supreme effort that he suppressed a mean impulse to trip the clumsy feet of the boy.

They approached the cow-barn door.

Suddenly Teo whipped around, pulled back his fist, set himself to strike.

Pier stopped, balled himself up too.

They faced each other, standing on toes, necks swollen, faces red, two roosters waiting for the other to strike first.

Teo started a blow, hesitated, stopped. His green-blue eyes clouded with doubt. He looked down for a second. Then he cried; whirled; crashed his fist into the side of the barn. The fist snapped through the siding as if it had been toothpicks.

Pier drew back a step.

Teo turned on him, waving a bleeding fist in his face. "Dad, Dad, if I stay here another minute, I'm liable to do something terrible. So I'm going. Going. And going for good. If you try to stop me, I'll just have to bust my way out." The boy turned, hunched away with long spanging strides.

Pier watched him go.

· 5 ·

The fiery sun started up still another day of cremation on the seventy-fifth successive morning. The end of the world was near.

After breakfast, Pier pulled his armchair up to the window, propped his feet up on the fuel box, tipped back on two legs.

He stared into the west. Beyond the burnt Hills of the Lord, in the city of Sioux Falls, lived his baby eagle, Teo.

At teatime Pier was still there, blue eyes sunk deep into a hollow face, his hair a flash-white, his two-day beard gray-red.

He stared the whole forenoon through, empty pipe in mouth, saying nothing, not even snapping back at Kaia's occasional whines.

Sweat bubbled on his wrinkled, leather forehead.

Near noon Kaia asked him to get some cobs from the pig yard.

He said nothing.

Grumbling, she went outdoors and picked some herself. She came in, filled the stove, let the stove lid clang to. She bumped against him, almost upsetting him.

He came down on all four, bumped back.

"Git out a the way then," she said, turning away.

Pier's eyes snapped. He bit once on his pipe, turned in his chair, growled, "Woman, will you kindly shut up? I'm tired a yer danged yankin'."

Kaia flashed around to face him. She leaned over a little, shrilled, "Oh, shut up, must I? We'll see about that. An' what about you, sittin' there on yer lazy prat, doin' nothin'?"

"Shut up."

"I'll never shut up for you, you worthless bum, sittin' in the house all day long. The house ain't no place fer a man. Get out in the barn where you belong. Get——"

"Shut up."

"Shut up yourself, you old billy goat."

Pier slowly filled and lighted his pipe.

She raged beside him. "You an' that worthless son a yours. I was sure glad to see him go."

"Shut up."

"He an' his machines. Always talkin' about his machines." She pushed back a strand of hair into the tangerine kerchief she was wearing as a cowl. "An' thinkin' himself so clever."

"Oh, shut up." Pier sat back on two legs again.

"If that boy a yours ever amounts to anything I'll be surprised. The big clumsy ox."

Pier said, looking out of the window, "Woman, you got that boy all wrong. He was a wonderful boy."

"Is that why you kicked him across the yard?"

"I never kicked him."

"Ha. What was you tryin' to do then the other day, kiss his caboose?"

"Woman, you got that boy all wrong. He's a fine boy. Young, an' good, an' as sweet as corn in milk. Milk."

"Oh, don't make me laugh."

Pier murmured to himself, "Yeh, he was a good boy all right. He was a juicy Maytime boy, he was."

She banged a pot on the stove. "You sound like a silly old woman."

Once more Pier came down on all fours. "Woman, will you shut up?"

"Try an' make me." Her black mink eyes became watchful.

He laid his pipe on the window sill.

"Try an' make me." She stepped back to the table, picked up a butcher knife. She got ready to slice some country sausage.

Pier hesitated.

"You an' that thief son a yours."

"Thief?"

"Yes, 'thief.' He stole fourteen dollars out a my purse."

"Holy horse collar. Now I ain't heard the last of it."

"He did. He did. He took it when he left. I saw him."

"You know, I'm beginnin' to understand why Stephan chose to live with the cows in the barn."

"Is that so? Now let me tell you something, you old buck rabbit. If––"

"Shut up."

"Why, you––"

Pier stood up, his eyes devilish. He grabbed the knife from her hand. He waved it. "Woman, if you so much as open your damned trap again, by God, I'll use this on you."

She jumped back on light feet. She covered her head with an upraised arm.

"I will."

She backed another step, jumped into the pantry, locked the door behind her.

Pier stood still a second, drew a long breath, sat down. He fumbled with the knife. There flashed through his mind the ancient story of the Frisian skipper whose boat wouldn't leave port even when a favorable wind was blowing strong. His mate, muttering that it had been hexed, opened up the hull below deck, and, with a knife, began slashing the walls in the dark. When the man crawled out again, his knife was smeared with blood. And almost instantly, the ship began to move out of harbor. After the voyage, the skipper went home. To his amazement he found his wife in bed, bandaged up, and covered with knife wounds, wounds just like those the mate

had inflicted on the wooden walls of his ship. The skipper understood then that his wife, who never had wanted him to sail the seas, had hexed the ship.

After a while Kaia came out of the pantry, cautiously. She carried out the creamer and sugar, set them on the table. She glanced at him, opened her mouth to say something, saw the knife, turned silently into the pantry again.

Pier eased back in his armchair. He put the knife on the window sill beside him. Sweat dripped off the point of his nose. Sweat ran down over his gaunt ribs beneath his faded blue shirt.

She came out again, saw where the knife lay, relaxed a little.

She set the table. She looked into a pot. She murmured a few words.

Pier said nothing.

She said, barely audible, "Men! I wouldn't give you five——"

Pier grabbed the knife, leaped for her.

She shrieked, ducked, flipped herself out the front door, cowering, holding her hands over her head.

Pier aimed a kick at her fleeing, wigging bottom, missed. He saw the bird cages in the corner, picked them up, sleeping birds and all, heaved them out on the yard after her. He ran to the bedroom, jammed her clothes in a drawer, heaved it outdoors. He became angrier as he ran. He cursed. He snorted unintelligible sounds. He ran into the parlor, ripped down all her pictures, heaved them out on the yard. He stood in the door. He saw her hiding behind the woodshed. He roared, "Get the hell off this place, you washed-out gully. Get back to yer nitwit brother. Go eat some a his moonseed, you whore-bitch burning bush, an' see how you like it."

Then he slammed the door shut, stalked across the kitchen, sat down in his armchair, lighted his pipe with trembling fingers, leaned back on two legs.

He smoked.

After a while, he said to himself, grunting, "Wal, buck-nun again."

3. BUT SHE WOULDN'T

. I .

AND THEN, ON THE SEVENTY-SIXTH SUCCESSIVE DAY, the hot eye of the hardhearted sun finally tired. Mare's tails began to trail in the September skies. The west thickened with fat clouds. The smell of air became sweet with rain.

It misted. It drizzled. It rained heavily. The loess became drenched, down to the first of the subsoils.

Sheet erosion stripped off more of the old lady earth's humus overcoat. Tiny plashes of water filled the hollows in the slowly rising and falling swells of the prairie. Masses of loess moved over the clay fleshes of the swirled subsoils. Slides and earth-flows and slumps opened galls on the overworked shoulders of the earth.

The gully down the east rise became a powerful runoff snaking through the orchard. Waters roared through it with twisting velocity. On its left, it swallowed another apple tree; on its right, it burrowed so far underneath the cement footings below the cellar that the two-story house began to totter. Each gust of wind threatened to tip the south wing into the gully.

Below, beyond the old well, the gully took a sudden turn to the north. It cut, and cut, and dug underneath the shallow foundation of the hog house; until at last, one night, the south half of the building balanced, hung, cracked away from the north half, fell into the clay-walled coulee.

The rains passed on. The skies opened wide and bright. The yellow-white September sunshine glowed everywhere.

Pier viewed the destruction. He studied it. Then, nodding to himself, he packed dirt and twigs under the cellar of the house. He salvaged the best boards out of the wreckage in the coulee, used them to close up the raw open end of the standing half of the hog house.

He discovered too that the rain had awakened the soybean and alfalfa roots in the hayfield. He narrowed his eyes. He nodded. Yessir. Next year he would increase the legume acreage. Ae.

And in what was left of the old garden and orchard, a second spring opened its flower. White petals glowed in the strawberry beds. Below the gaunt, dead arms of the plum and apple trees strange pink blossoms veiled the sucker stems. From brown twig to blackened limb birds flitted, joyfully chittering.

He took a walk in the Big Sioux Valley. The black-eyed Susans, the pink-frilled bull thistle, the white-flowered morning-glories crawled painfully over the bright red bits of frost-shattered quartzite.

It was another world. Wild-grape vines climbed the trunks of scented cedars, waving green hands at the gently passing winds. Gentle ferns whispered demurely under the wild red loves of the sumac. Orange rose berries spangled the wild rosebushes.

A smartweed opened its tiny pink flowers. The skeleton grass rattled. Harsh leaves of wild burdock coughed hoarsely. Five-fingers slept. Prickly lettuce ruffled its leaves. Wild asters pushed up delicate

pale yellow petals. The Mexican burning bush flamed crimson. The grape-mauve leaves of the scrub oak clattered.

Flies festered everywhere. They were getting in their last good bite before death.

Pier saw it all, and shrugging, wondering, bewildered, walked on.

. 2 .

The two years of grace were over.

When Blacktail did not come to see him about the mortgages, Pier decided to make the first move and get the bad news over with. As long as things were left unsettled he could neither plan nor plow.

He dressed in a clean overall, Sunday shoes, worn blue-and-black mackinaw.

On the way to the crib alley to get out the old Buick, he picked up a twig on the yard and, taking off the cap from the tank, measured the gas. Holding it up to the light, he found that the fluid had only darkened it an inch. There was just enough to go to town and back.

He set the spark and gas, cranked the engine to save the battery. It started easily. In a moment he backed out, turned, bumped up the rough lane.

He drove steadily until he came to the brow of the long hill north of Kaia's lane, then shut off the engine. The heavy machine coasted all the way into town. It came silently to rest before the implement shop.

Pier stepped inside. It smelled sweetly of machine oils and fired iron. He knocked, found no one in the office. He halloed through the shop. A garbled echo came back to him.

A head popped out of a shiny new corn-picking machine, asked, "What d'you want?"

"Where's Blacktail?"

"Who?"

"Peter Puddicombe. The son of the earl."

A white grin cut across the grease-black face. "Oh, the boss. I dunno. I guess he's in the bank."

"Thanks." Pier looked at the youth, wondered if he should know him despite the war paint, suddenly realized it was Red Joe's boy.

"Hi, Jimmy. Hey, I didn't know you worked here. When'd you get the job?"

"A couple a weeks ago." Peering out of the black mask, the boy's eyes seemed even more shifty than his father's.

Pier lifted a shoulder. "I never knew I'd live to see the day when a son a Red Joe's'd be workin' fer a son of a bitch like Blacktail. I never."

Jimmy hardened. "Well, I had to find some work somewhere. I wasn't gonna let my dad starve me like you starved Teo."

"Still got that wisenose tongue a yers, ain't y'u? Wait'll I see yer father." Pier shook his head sadly. "His blood must a changed to puke to let you work for that Judas."

Jimmy shrugged weakly. His sly eyes closed and he dropped back into the machine.

Pier stepped across the street to the Starum Bank. Four cars were spotted against the curb of the quiet main street. The engine in the grain elevator puffed like a tired dog. He opened the door of the red stone bank, stepped across the quartzite floor, looked in through the shiny brass teller's window. "Blacktail here?" he demanded gruffly.

A face came to the window. It was Weasel Willie Rexwinkel. "Pardon?"

Pier snorted. "So you got promoted too, huh?"

Weasel Willie smiled a little. "What was it you wanted?"

"Blacktail."

"He's in the Mercantile across the street."

"You sure?"

"Sure I'm sure." Weasel Willie flipped a roll of snap-crisp bills with a rubber finger.

"Say, Willie, I always meant to ask y'u. Does yer nose fit into Blacktail's behind pretty well?"

"I don't think I get what you mean."

"You know what I mean all right, you little snugglepup."

Weasel Willie's face clouded and he glanced anxiously at two well-dressed strangers leaning over a row of account books near the wall. "Now, Mr. Frixen, I——"

"Willie, why don't you act like a man? Imitatin' that sneak boss a yers is gonna lead you straight to hell-fire."

"I still don't get you, Mr. Frixen."

"Wal, fer one thing, why don't you get married?"

Weasel Willie blinked.

"Here y'u are already. Thirty-three some years old an' you still ain't nothin' to show for it. Why, my kid Teo looks more like a man than you do right now." Pier cleared his nose. "Hell, y'u ain't even raised a beard yit, ha' you?"

Weasel Willie fidgeted.

"Willie, that sneak's life ye're leadin' with yer boss is very unrewardin'."

"Say, Mr. Frixen," Weasel Willie whispered, leaning forward, "take it easy. Them's bank examiners in there."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Really. Take it easy, Mr. Frixen."

Pier grinned. He bored a derisive look straight into the callow's eyes.

Weasel Willie looked down. His slick pompadour suddenly let go and tumbled over his face. With a quick, sweeping, nervous gesture, he grabbed a comb from his vest pocket and began to smooth it back again.

Pier laughed and left.

He legged it across the street, the gravel under his work shoes crunching a little.

He stepped up on the curb. A twinge prickled in his back. He held his hand over it as he stepped inside the store.

The inside of the old building had undergone a startling change. The old potbellied stove that had always been stained gray with spittle spots, as if pigeons had dunged on it, was gone. The low counters were gone. So too the herring barrel. In their place had come a grated furnace register, neat glass showcases, and slot machines. The register, yawning blackly in the floor, breathed hot air up Pier's pant legs.

A pert, brown-eyed girl clerk stepped forward from the cigarette counter. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Pier looked at her. Was this the beauty who had stirred Teo into making a trinket box? Pier held his hand over his mouth and coughed behind it. "Yeh. I'd like to talk to Bla . . . Puddicombe."

"He's in back there. In his office." She smiled. "Busy figurin'." She swished her stiff-curled hair. "Right through there."

"Thanks." Pier stepped past a row of sugar sacks and into a low

room. In it sat Blacktail. He was leaning back in his chair and staring out of the window. His eyes were twisted with worry. His gray brow was crooked, his lips thin-set.

Pier said, "Hi. There you are. What're you doin', figurin' out a new way to skin me?"

Blacktail jumped; then, seeing Pier, forced a smile to his lips. The gray mustache stirred. "Oh, hello, Frixen. Here, take a seat." Blacktail groaned a little as he shoved a chair toward Pier. "Well, and how are things up your way?"

"Good."

"How were the crops?"

"Good. Got a few potatoes. Them that the potato bugs was too proud to eat."

"Uh-huh."

They sat in silence for a moment.

Pier asked, "Wal, what's the bad news?"

Blacktail swept back his brush of gray hair with a thin hand. His eyes wicked nervously. "Look, Frixen, let's go across the street and have a beer. This is no place to talk."

Pier's eyes opened. "Okay by me." Pier wondered at the man's sudden mellowness. Probably Blacktail was at last having a little financial trouble himself. Pier nodded. Ae, give a lamb horns and he'll take after you; take 'em away and he'll lick your hand again.

They stood up.

Blacktail drew on a sleek gray overcoat, a well-blocked hat, and stepped out of the office ahead of Pier.

Together they entered the Beer & Billiard. Two farmers were standing at the far end of the bar, tippling. They were silly with beer.

"Hi, Herman," Pier greeted.

Old Herman Brackx, standing near the window, took a toothpick out of his mouth, hitched up his hanging belly, said, "Hi, yerself. How's it go?"

"Couldn't be better."

"Uh-huh."

The two farmers gaped at them with open red mouths.

Blacktail said, rubbing his hands, looking around uneasily, "Let's go sit in that booth at the end there."

Pier nodded, and followed.

Herman Brackx stepped around the bar, and came up. "What'll it be, gents?"

Pier waited for Blacktail. It was his party.

Blacktail said, "Well, I guess I want a beer. And a ham sandwich."

Herman Brackx looked at Pier.

"Oh, I'll take a beer too," Pier said. "Might as well drown my sorrows with you."

Blacktail asked, "Don't you want a sandwich?"

"Wal . . ."

"Go ahead. It's all on me."

Herman Brackx stepped away, shouted toward the rear, "Two hamwiches."

"Comin' up," echoed a voice.

Pier played with the salt shaker. He poured a little salt in the palm of his hand. He wetted a finger, dipped it into the small white mound, tasted the clean mineral. He said, musingly, "This stuff reminds me of the old days. Them days, when a man had trouble with somebody, somebody he was afraid of, he made sure that he ate a little salt an' bread with him. Because that made 'em salt-an'-bread brothers."

Blacktail looked up momentarily; looked away. He tapped the top of the brown linoleumed table with a nervous finger.

Herman Brackx came up with two bottles of beer. "The ham will be up in a minute."

Pier and Blacktail nodded.

"Want mustard? Catsup?"

"Yeh. I'll have some," Pier said.

Herman Brackx waddled away. He slapped the shoulder of one of the farmers familiarly. They talked together, laughing.

Pier asked, taking a swig and lighting his corncob pipe, "Wal, what's the good news? Do I leave tonight or tomorrer?"

Blacktail rubbed his brows again. He said slowly, "Pier, I'm afraid I've got bad news for you. There was a time when I could've afforded to let you go on. I had money then. But now . . . I'm afraid I can't. I've got to foreclose you."

"Don't tell me ye're broke?" Pier scoffed.

"Well . . . not quite. But if I don't call in my loans, I'm done. Pier, I'm sorry, but I just have to call in yours."

"You won't give me another chance?"

"Pier, I . . ." Blacktail looked at him. "Pier, don't tell me you're still willing to go on after all this?"

"Why not? It can't get worse. An' anything better means success."

Blacktail shook his head. "Pier, you sure are a piece. I don't know what to make of you. You old . . ."

Pier laughed at him. "Go ahead. Say it. In your dad's England they'd probably call a feller like me an auburn Willie, but out here in the good old U.S.A., they just call him a plain ordinary redheaded son of a bitch."

"No, I don't mean that. I mean . . . well, as much as I hate to admit it, I really admire you, goddammit. All these years . . ."

"Thanks."

Pier paused to suck on his pipe. "One thing I do know, though. If I'd had any luck atall, you'd never a got those mink claws inta me."

"No, I suppose not," Blacktail said. He took three quick swallows from his bottle; lighted a cigarette.

Pier drank from his bottle too. He pulled his blue cap deeper over his eyes.

Herman Brackx came up with the sandwiches, and mustard and catsup. Blacktail fished in his pocket, brought up a roll of bills. He peeled off a dollar, handed it to the other. Herman Brackx ran exploratory fingers into the pockets of his sagging trousers, found the change, walked back to the bar.

Pier put out his pipe and picked up a sandwich. He flattened it between his heavy fingers before taking a bite. He said, "Blacktail, there's one thing I'd like to ask y'u."

"Yes?"

"I've never been able to figure out just what happened to you about the time Nertha and I got married. One day you was hardly worth the clothes you was dressed in, the next day you was rich. What made you change so fast?"

"I dunno." Blacktail began to munch his sandwich.

"Man, from an easy-come, easy-go spendthrift you suddenly became as tight as bark on a tree. Why, it got to be so that every time I lit a fire somewheres, you was right there to fry yer herrings on it. It wasn't because of that run-in we had on that back road there, was it? When you wouldn't get out of the road with yer new automobile?"

"Oh no. That had nothin' to do with it. Besides, the change came

over me before then." Blacktail rinsed his mouth with a swallow of beer. He cleared his throat. "No, I really can't say what happened. Maybe my father expected too much from me and I bucked and put myself in reverse gear. Maybe it's just that I got tired of helling around. You know how it is, Pier. When you're young you live wild for a while. And then, all of a sudden, for no good reason at all, you just straighten out. It's probably just a case of where the bull in a young man wears out and his conscience takes over."

Pier nodded. "Maybe so." He bit into his sandwich. His tongue wrestled with the big bite a moment, shoved it to one side in his cheek. "Yeh, that could be it. We all change, I guess. After you're finished seedin', the good Lord lets you know through yer bones He ain't got much use for you no more, an' then you get scared, an' you hang onto everything you can get your hands onto."

"That's right. That's right."

Pier took another bite. When he had swallowed it, he asked, "One thing you didn't do though. Get married. Have boys."

Blacktail sniffed. "Huh, you know what luck you had with that. You only had one."

"Yeh, but that don't count. It just didn't happen to work out for me."

"You may be glad it didn't. When I saw how married life worked out for you clodhoppers around here, I swore I'd never get myself tied into a knot like that. No sir. I wanted to be free. Free to do anything I wanted to do any time I wanted to do it. Getting married to a woman is the same thing as settling down on a piece of land. You're tied to it. You've got to give her attention every day. And that was something I wasn't willing to give. No, Pier, I worked out another way to take care of my love life."

Pier sipped his beer, wiped his lips. He glanced around the beer hall, looked at the smoke-stained ceiling, noticed a sign NO SPIKING ALLOWED PUNISHABLE BY LAW, saw the sagging crotch of a farmer's overall. Finally he asked, sighing, "Wal, then ye're gonna hold a sheriff's sale over t'my place?"

Blacktail guggled some beer. He wiped his mustache. "Yes, in a few weeks." As an afterthought, he added, "One thing I can do for you, though, Pier. I can let you rent the land. I can't farm it, you know. I got to get a renter."

Pier stood up. "Rent my own land back to me? Never. No, if it

comes to that, I'd rather get a fresh start somewheres else. Where nobody knows me."

"I'm sorry, Frixen, but that's all I can offer you now."

Pier said nothing, and turned, and walked out of the Beer & Billiard. He loped along, holding his back.

· 3 ·

Pier cranked the car. It started on the quarter turn.

He threw the crank under the seat, and, holding his back, got in behind the wheel. A mackinaw button caught on a spoke; he unhooked it.

He backed the car from the curb, started up the street. He drove past a filling station, once the old harness shop.

He thought of seeing Ma Lysbeth. But, he asked himself, what could she do to help? Even with her second husband's, Âlde Folkwâlda's, property added, she had all she could do to keep herself and her man out of the poorhouse. Besides, he didn't have the heart to ask her for anything after the way he had behaved toward her the last few years.

He speeded up, turned south to climb the hill. The horizon was gray with winter's clouds.

He drove with his finger tips. The old Buick and he were one. He touched the gas and the old engine jumped like a flexed muscle under skin.

He climbed past Red Bluff. He neared the corner.

He decided to see Red Joe, and turning left instead of right, in a minute found himself going down Red Joe's lane. He parked in front of the house and got out. The yard was silent. The windows of the house were white with quiet, like the eyes of a blind horse.

He heard a timmering sound in one of the barns. He stepped toward it. He stumbled over a rough, hoof-pitted yard, over a hardened manure pile, entered the dusk of a weathered cattle shed. A face looked up. "Mister Red Joe Faber. Hi."

"Hello, Pier." Red Joe waved a hammer, tapped a nail into a pen he was building on the earthen floor. When he finished, he looked up.

"What's goin' on here?" Pier asked.

"Nothin' much. Just that my damned new tom bull is always jumpin' fences. The bastard. I give him plenty a bread an' breedin',

but still he jumps 'em. That's way I'm buildin' this bullproof pen here."

"Where's he now?"

"I got him in the barn."

"Why not keep him there?"

"I really ain't got the room. I got two cows comin' in an' he's got the place they're gonna get."

"Oh."

Red Joe put down his hammer, studied his work. He spread his bowlegs a little. "Huh, from the looks a what I built there, a man'd think I did it in the dark."

Pier grinned. "Oh, it'll work though." He pulled out his pipe, filled it, lighted it. "I suppose you'd like to have me help you get him in here."

"Be mighty nice a you if you did."

The two men stepped across the yard. Pier kicked at two round white stones half buried in the ground. He laughed to himself. "When I was a boy Pa Romke used to tell me they was cow eggs."

Red Joe grinned.

They entered the barn. It smelled pleasantly of straw and hairy bodies. Leaving the door open behind them, they walked behind a row of stanchioned, mangy red-and-white cows. They stepped down a narrow alley, came to a stall. A red Shorthorn bull got up from the straw. The massive brute, almost as high as Red Joe, began to paw the floor, rumbling.

"Hey, a wild one," Pier said. "I'll say he needs to be locked up." He put away his warm pipe.

"That's what I meant."

Red Joe opened the door of the stall.

The bull lumbered into the opening, stopped.

"Yi there," Pier gestured, trying to chase the creature on.

"Not too much," Red Joe warned, "He'll go fast enough when he gets goin'."

"Wal, he can't stand there all day," Pier said. Seeing a three-tine fork leaning against a nearby pillar, he picked it up and reached it through the partition and lightly pricked the animal.

The bull jumped and ran down the alley and plunged, tail high, outdoors.

"Hey," Red Joe shouted, "hurry, man, or the bastard'll be over the fence an' gone again."

Pier was after the animal in a leap. He forgot about his aching back. He too dived out of the door.

The bull veered toward the water tank. Then, seeing Pier come pell-mell after, it turned toward the gate of the pasture. With greyhound speed Pier leaped across the rough barnyard to head it off. He outran the bull. With a snort the bull lowered its head and turned left. It lunged across the yard, shot into the cattle shed.

"We got 'im!" Red Joe yelled, hobbling after it.

Pier came up fast, puffing.

Together they slammed shut the long gray sliding doors. They stood breathing wildly inside the dusky shed.

When Red Joe got his breath back, he said, "You shouldn't've pricked him, Pier."

"Wal, why not? It worked, didn't it?"

Red Joe glanced at him briefly; looked away. "Well, now that we got him so far, we might as well chase him into his pen there."

Pier winked his eyes. Gradually he began to make out the interior of the shed.

They advanced cautiously on the bulky animal. It backed into a corner. The men moved on tense feet.

Pier made a leap. He landed on the shoulders of the bull, threw his arm around its neck, hung on, and, as the creature began to run in circles, slid down its neck and with two hooked powerful fingers caught the brute's wet rubbery nose in a viselike grip. He dropped to his feet and tugged. Instantly the bull quieted and lowered its head, trying to rid itself of the pest.

"Good work," Red Joe said. "Hold him tight now an' I'll ring the bastard." Red Joe picked up a huge pincer. He fitted a copper ring into its claw-open mouth. He leaned over the bull's head. Suddenly he clamped the handles of the pincer to and the ring snapped through the soft skin and cartilage of the creature's nose. It clicked. Flesh parted. The bull jumped. "There," Red Joe grunted.

Pier held the bull by the ring. "Now to the pen."

"No, wait a minute. I got a yoke I wanna put on him. That'll make sure he'll never jump fence again. Just a minute." Red Joe ran outdoors.

Pier waited. Dust raised by the chase was thick around. He coughed. He brushed red hairs from his mackinaw and face.

Red Joe came rushing in, dragging a heavy wooden frame. "This

will make a law-abidin' critter out a him." He fitted it around the ponderous neck of the bull. Quickly he nailed the bulky frame together. "All right, now lead him to his pen."

Pier tugged and the bull followed. Pier led him into the pen, stepped out, and closed the gate.

"Ah. There." Red Joe heaved a sigh of relief.

The bull, realizing its nose was free, backed up until it hit the wall, then jumped forward. It tried to leap the partition near the wall. But the frame was in the way and it stumbled and rolled to its knees. It quieted. It stood up slowly. It lowed.

"Yeh, I guess that does it all right," Pier said, brushing his clothes some more. "Whew! That was quite a wrestle for an old man like me."

"Yeh."

They stood admiring their work. Pier pulled out his corncob pipe, filled it, lighted it.

Red Joe found a plug of tobacco, bit off a piece, chewed it.

Pier remembered what he had come for. "Say, Red Joe, I guess I need a little help."

"Oh?"

"Yeh. It's come. Blacktail's foreclosin' me. Just like he tried to do you."

"Oh." Red Joe kicked at the earthen floor of the shed. His eyes were instantly furtive.

"Yeh." Pier waited for Red Joe to make the first move.

Neither said a word for a moment.

At last Pier said, "Ain't you got anything to say?"

"Well, Pier, I . . . there ain't much to say, is there?"

Pier said, his eyes narrowing, "Red Joe, my friend, you ain't turned piker on me?"

"No. Course not."

"You can't think of a thing?"

Red Joe coughed. "Pier, I know what ye're thinkin'. Ye're thinkin' we ought a pitch in an' help you save yer stuff. Like you saved mine."

"Huh. Took you some time to get around to it."

"Yeh, I know. But times are different now, Pier."

"Different?"

"Sure. For one thing, it just ain't possible to get the farmers out for a penny sale. They won't come."

"They're all broke, ain't they?"

"Well, in a way they are, an' in a way they ain't."

"What kind a talk is that, Red Joe? Ye're facin' two ways."

"But it's the truth. Farmers are gittin' some help from the guv'ment now. For not raisin' too many hogs. For not raisin' corn. An' for what little corn an' hogs they do raise, they're gettin' a good price. Pier, you've got to face it. Farmers won't be in the mood t' help you now. Even the Bolshevik Grimovich boys has cooled down. You see, they ain't got that hopeless feeling no more. Even in this drought. They know somebody's behind them now."

"Red Joe, when you was down an' out, did I . . ." Pier tripped on the words. "Aw, t'hell with it."

Red Joe cringed; then abruptly faced Pier. "Look, why didn't you join the corn and hog program when you had the chance?"

"Aw . . . t'hell with the guv'ment. T'hell with everything."

"Come now, Pier. Be reasonable."

"Like you, I suppose." Pier lifted a long arm and pointed. "Red Joe, I've known the time when you would a disowned yer son the day he started to work for Blacktail. That devil."

Red Joe said nothing.

Pier whirled around, walked out of the shed. He stalked across the yard, cranked the old Buick, drove off.

He had gone but a quarter of a mile when the car choked and stopped. "Uh-huh," Pier muttered, "out a gas. That extra little ways to Red Joe did it. Judas Priest, things are sure goin' to the dogs fast today." He got out, went to the side of the road, snapped off a long weed in the ditch, brushed off the dead leaves, thrust it into the gas tank. The weed came out dry. "Wal, I might as well walk home. Got to work from where you are." He pulled his mackinaw up close and started out.

He came to the corner. He stood for a moment to catch his breath. His land across the fence spread in dunes to the northwest, slowly rising to the swell. A chilly northwest breeze began to breathe on his face.

An old Model T sedan came grumbling toward him from the north, a plume of brown dust following it. Two men were in it: one driving, the other sleeping against a half-opened window.

The camel-clumsy car slowed, started to turn the corner, shuddered, stopped with a hiccup in front of Pier. The driver, an old

man, wore a soiled moleskin cap and had wispy sideburns. He motioned past the sleeping man for Pier to step up.

Pier came up. "Hi."

"Shay, what's the way to Canton?"

"Ye're right on the road."

"Hell's bells. So this is it, huh? Man, we've been runnin' all over the country an' gettin' nowhere fast. Left Sioux Falls this mornin' an' been travelin' ever since."

"Sioux Falls!" Pier ejaculated. "Judas Priest, you must be drunk to ha' missed the road so."

The old man looked slyly at the other, a middle-aged man. "Me? Naw. But he sure is. An' he's supposed to give me directions. He knows this country."

"Where you from?"

"Pipestone."

"An' you don't know this country?"

"No. I never go nowheres except to go to Sioux Falls. Just know the way up and back from Pipestone. But this feller, Jake here, he knows the country."

"Wal, wake him up."

"It don't do no good. Jake here, my hired man, I promised I'd take him to see his folks livin' t'Canton. But the damned fool, he got drunk on me." He nudged the other. "Hey, Jake, wake up, you old buzzard."

Jake snapped up and rolled his eyes. He saw Pier, held up his hands. "Hup. Ugh. I ain't got no money, mister."

Pier grinned. "I ain't holdin' you up."

Jake blinked and swallowed. His face was thin, and faintly whiskered with a yellow beard. As he began to awake, and move his jaw, a drop of red-brown tobacco juice began to run over the point of his chin. "Oh." He lowered his hands. "Cripes, I thought you was a holdup."

The old man said, "Aw, Jake, you're drunk."

Jake rolled his head. He snorted to clear his mind. A covert look narrowed his eyes. He nodded toward the other and said to Pier, "Don't listen to Ole. He thinks he's the cat's meow."

Pier smiled.

Ole asked, "You said this was the way to Canton?"

"Yip. Just go right past my house beyond the rise there, keep follerin' the new grade, an' y'u can't miss."

"Can't give you a lift, kin we?"

"Sure. About a half a mile."

"Get in."

Pier opened the door and crawled past the movable front seat on which Jake sat. He kicked aside a jack, a tire, a dozen ears of half-shelled corn, a bulky sack, and sat down.

Ole glanced over his shoulder. "Find room back there?"

"Yeh. Go ahead."

Ole whirred the starter. The motor caught, and the Model T took off with a lurch.

Ole drove loosely, weaving from one side of the road to the other.

Suddenly Jake jerked upright in his seat. "Whoops. What a wonderful woman she was."

Ole looked sideways at Jake and laughed, and then, seeing he was headed for the ditch, whirled the steering wheel. The car veered into the track again.

"Whoops. What a woman." Jake turned to Pier. "Mister, you never saw a woman like that Susie I saw in Sioux Falls. Mister, she was wonderful."

To humor the man, Pier nodded. He watched the drop of tobacco juice trickle down Jake's neck and soak into the collar of his faded blue jacket.

"Huh?" Jake asked. "What'd you say?" Two yellow teeth jutted from his upper jaw like a squirrel's.

"I didn't say nothin'."

"Oh."

Ole looked sideways again, said, nudging him, "Jake, ye're drunk."

"Sure I'm drunk. An' I'm havin' a helluva good time too. Whoops, what a woman she was. Wow." Jake turned to Pier again. Another trickle of tobacco juice began to pulse over the point of the man's chin. "We was up at a restaurant in Sioux Falls. There was a nice little Susie waitress in there. Nice. A fine little heifer. Didn't say much, but she didn't need to. She had it all in her heft, the way she stood. Like so. Boy, huh, Ole, she sure had it, didn't she?" Jake slapped Ole's leg with a whack, turned to Pier again. "A nice little Susie."

"Wal, from what you say, she sure sounds good to me."

Jake suddenly quieted. His eyes became reflective; then, as abruptly, lighted again. "Boy, I sure wish I could a got my hands on her. But she wouldn't."

Ole whirled the steering wheel and leaned over and asked, "Why wouldn't she?"

"Say," Jake demanded, "who do you think she is? Some old slut? Hell, she's a queen. She don't go in for old wrecks like me. She ain't made for worn-out steers."

Ole smirked. "You must a thought you had some kind a chance with her the way you spent your dough on her. Why, you threw away enough to set her up for life."

"Them ten bucks? Hell, that's nothin'. Chicken feed." Jake slapped Ole's leg again. "Whoops, what a wonderful woman she was. Boy, how I would a liked to have gotten my hands on her monkey."

Pier stirred on his hard seat, trying to visualize what was going through Jake's mind. He looked at the land.

Again Jake lapsed into a moment of reflective silence; again burst out of it. "No, that money I spent on her wasn't wasted. Just lookin' at her, sittin' there, quiet, smilin', drinkin' the beer I bought for her with them nice red lips a hers . . . whoops, Ole, she sure was nice, huh? Wasn't she now?"

"Well, she wasn't bad."

"Bad? She was wonderful. What a wonderful dame she was. A reg'lar jewel. Ole, I sure would a liked to have gotten my fingers on her monkey. Whoops."

"Aw, Jake, you got yer mind in the gutter."

"Say, don't talk to me like that about my girl. I spent ten whole dollars on her an' I had a lot a fun. An' she was worth every buck of it too. Even though she wouldn't."

Pier saw his lane coming toward them and he pushed forward to the edge of his seat. He pointed. "That's where I get off."

Ole nodded and stepped on the brake. The heavy head of the camel-backed Model T leaned over and the car slowed and the motor choked and died and the car stopped.

Pier got out. "Thanks fer the lift."

"That's all right. Glad to be able to do it fer you."

Pier waved.

"An' ye're sure this road goes right t'Canton?"

Pier nodded.

Jake swung his head around. "So long, ol' pal. See you next Christmas."

Again Pier waved.

The Model T started up.

Jake leaned sideways and slapped Ole on the shoulder and shouted over the sound of the clattering motor, "Whoops. Boy, what a woman she was, huh, Ole? Wasn't she nice though, huh?"

Ole nodded and laughed and, seeing that the car was aimed straight for the ditch, jerked the wheel around. The car careened wildly down the road, dust smoking up behind it.

"Roughnecks," Pier muttered, half smiling, half cursing at them. "Roughnecks. No good to nobody. Don't blame the gal none for not takin' Jake on." He stepped slowly down the lane, holding his back. He neared his empty house. He noticed how the south end of it leaned over the gully.

The talk of the two strangers continued to sound in his ears. He felt lonesome.

4. THE EVERLASTING WEIRD

. I .

PIER'S YARD WAS BLACK WITH BLUE-CLAD FARMERS.

From the southwest came gentle veils of red-brown dust. They trailed over and among the men. A gray-brown sky cast an ashen light upon all things. It grayed the weathered shingles on the barn and the woodshed.

The sheriff's sale was almost over. Two horses, and the cows, were all that was left.

Baskets of clothes, furniture that still shone from Nertha's care, the phonograph and radio, barrels of nails and staples, boxes of wrenches and bolts, tubs, chickens in crates, cultivators and plows, cleaners, the sheller and shredder and corn picker, a white chamber

pot, all these, had already been knocked down by Sheriff Rexwinkel's auctioneer's cane. Everything was going, everything except a team of horses, a plow, a few personal belongings which the law allowed Pier to keep.

Pier trotted out the grays, Betts and Belle. A circle of shrewd-eyed bidders surveyed them.

It was cold and the men in the circle drew down their flap-eared caps. They pressed closer.

Pier drove the grays around once more.

Someone raised a finger.

Sheriff Rexwinkel roared, "Sold. Sold to Otto Grimovich there for a hundred and fifty dollars." The barrel-heavy sheriff waved his cane, stopped to wipe his beer-red face. He stepped down from the box and started for the barn.

The swarm of bidders broke up. They followed the sheriff. The descendants of Âlde Romke's black-and-whites were next.

As Pier turned to follow them, he saw Ma Lysbeth hobbling toward him from the house. Herman Brackx had brought her. Except for her grotesquely protruding windbelly she was very thin. Wrinkled skin lay in folds over her long bony frame. Her two legs were almost as spindling as the cane she used, and one followed the other as she crept along: first the cane, then the right leg, then the left. She was three sticks walking through dust.

Pier's impulse was to snap at her. But he took hold of himself. "Hi, Ma."

"Soan." The old lady's voice was barely a breath. It was harsh. "Soan, them thieves, they stole my jar of yeast."

Pier remembered it. "Oh, now, Ma, you must be mistaken. They wouldn't do that."

She tapped her cane in the dust. "It ain't there, soan. An' as sure as I'm standing here, I know they stole it." Her vague, milky eyes searched his face. "Thieves."

"What would you want with it now anyway, huh?"

"Why, soan, you're to come home an' live with me. An' I'm to keep house for you. Like I once did."

Pier shook his head. "No, Ma. That's all done now. No."

"Soan, you're to come with me."

"No, Ma. That wouldn't work atall."

"Where are you going then?"

"Me? I don't know. Somewhere. Certainly not with you. We'd never get along. It'd never work. No."

"You're going to let me die alone then? With no kin aroun'?"

"Wal, Ma . . . Oh, now, Ma, you've got a long life ahead yit. Besides, ain't Alde Folkwâlda there to take care a you?"

She bowed her head, wrote in the dust with her cane.

"An' then too, Ma, I'm through with wimmen for a while. With land. I don't wanna be around where anything reminds me of 'em."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry, Ma." Pier turned away.

He followed the last of the men into the barn.

Pederson tugged at his jacket sleeve. He was thin, bent.

Pier forced a watery smile into his eyes. "Hi, Pederson."

"How are you, Pier?"

"Fine. Good."

"I'm sorry to see this, Pier."

"Huh. Ye're about the only one who feels that way."

Pederson shook his head. "I wouldn't say that, Pier."

"Not? Just look at them buzzards then. Look at 'em crowding into the pie plate. Just like a bunch a botflies crawlin' in a fresh shoulder sore. Only this time the horse ain't got no tail to switch 'em off."

Pederson's gray eyes tightened with troubled thought. He said, "Maybe you've heard this from me before, but don't you think you had some of it coming?"

"Me?"

Pederson looked down at the ground and scuffed the dirt. He coughed and wiped his lips. "You yourself sowed the seed of the rod that's now beating you, Pier."

Pier stared at him.

"You wouldn't take advice, Pier. You were too proud."

"Huh."

"Just like Jim Hill. He wouldn't listen either. When he wanted something, and wanted it bad enough, he'd just close those ears of his to everything except what he wanted to hear." Pederson tugged at his tan cap. "A long time ago I told him, I told him that some of this country wasn't to be farmed. There wasn't enough water. But he knew better. He said, 'I'll send Professor Shaw down there and he'll show you.' Sure. And this Shaw came and he told us and

this is what we got. No, you can guess at dry weather, but you can't finance it."

Pier tried to pull away.

Pederson was right after him. "Pier, tell me. Why do you close your ears to good advice? Tell me."

"I dunno."

"Take vaccination. You'll vaccinate pigs, but not kids. Why?"

Pier shrugged.

Pederson pointed through a window. Beyond in the dusty gloom stood the house. "See that? A good frost bulge and the south wing of that house'll tip into the gully. Or even just a good jerking wind. Pier, I saw it coming years ago, when you started plowing your furrows up and down the hill instead of along it. I told you about it, Pier. But you wouldn't listen. Oh no. No, you thought we fellows"—and Pederson's voice became edged with irony—"we guv'ment fellows was buttinskys. We had too long a nose. We was dictating to you farmers. Huh."

Pier looked down. He pulled his cap over his white hair. In the background he could hear the farmers talking, hear the sheriff get ready to auction off the cattle.

Pederson took a deep breath, became abruptly gentle. "Pier, I shouldn't go on like this. But you're my friend. Tell me, Pier, what are you going to do after this?"

"Hit the road, I guess. Live in a ditch somewheres. I dunno." Shep the dog, excited by all the attention he was getting, came up and licked Pier's hand. Pier petted him for a moment.

"I hate to see a good man turn bum. There should be some place for a man like you. A hard worker."

"It's a cinch it ain't in this neck of the woods." Pier wiped his nose. A blob of wetted dust hung in it. Holding his fingers alternately over each nostril, he blew vigorously through both passages. "No, I guess I just don't fit here. At least not as the owner of my own piece a land." Pier looked sneeringly at the other farmers milling around. Most of them were renters; the rest guv'ment pail-feds.

"Oh yes you do, Pier. With just a little more sense you'd make a perfect fit. It takes a hero to live out here and that's what you are. A hero."

"Or a fool."

"No. Not a fool. Hero. Pier, where have you ever seen country

with bigger ups and downs than this here God's country? Why, when it rains, it floods. When it shines, it burns. When it blows, it raises hell to high heaven. When it snows, it blizzards. Why, just take this dust blowing right here right now. In two hours, with a Nebraska hurricane blowing behind it, we could be right in the middle of a first-class black roller, piling up dust so thick you'd think it was the devil's snow coming out of hell itself. Man, it takes a hero to survive such stuff. A hero who thinks. Thinks."

The talk made Pier nervous. He coughed and looked through his pockets for his pipe. He found it and lit it and said, "Aw hell, don't waste yer breath on me. I'm done. Go talk to the kids growing up."

Pederson blinked. His eyes opened. "Oh say. That reminds me. I saw your boy Teo last week. In Sioux Falls."

Pier's eyes lighted. "You did?"

"Sure. You got a nice boy there, Pier."

"Don't I know it. Tell me, what was he doin'?" Pier didn't mention that there were two letters from Teo in the house, that he had been too proud to ask a stranger to read them to him.

"He was working in a machine shop nights, going to school days."

"That's wonderful. Good."

"Yes, Pier. There's a good head screwed to that boy's shoulders."

"Wal now, wal now . . ." Pier flushed. "Wal now . . ."

Pederson looked respectfully off to one side. He pulled his gray cap deep over his old eyes. He pulled his coat up close around his bone-thin hips.

"It's sure good to hear that," Pier murmured. "Sure good."

Pederson coughed, and said, "Well, Pier, you still haven't told me what you're going to do."

"Wal, it's a dead cinch I ain't stayin' around Starum here. It ain't no fun livin' near a dyin' town, where everybody you see is eighty years old or more, an' the graveyard's lost in dust drifts, an' the stuff you buy in the stores is all dried up because everybody buys in the big towns now. No, Siouxland, she ain't for me no more. I'm pullin' out."

"Pier, you ain't running away from her? Deserting her?"

"If you want to call it that, yeh, I am. I'm sick a seein' her. I hope I never see her again."

"Oh, now, Pier, that's foolish talk. You know you can't run away from her."

"Oh yes I can."

"No, Pier, no. You can never escape her. You see, someday you'll die, and there's only one place you can be buried in. And that's the earth. In her."

A drum of laughter beat up around them. Glancing over, Pier saw that belly-heavy Sheriff Rexwinkel had rolled off a box. Deputy Ain'it, his crow-black eyes wrinkling with mirth, was helping the fat man to his feet again and brushing fresh cow dung from his clothes.

Pier broke away from Pederson. He leaned against a dusty, cob-webbed upright. He blinked his eyes. He smelled the sweet earthy straw, the warm hides of the cows. He glanced at his friends. They were greedily eying his possessions. There was Otto Grimovich, silent, quiet, much older, no longer the rebel, still spitting sunflower seeds; the Brandt boys, caps tipped back on their necks, long-stemmed pipes dangling from half-opened lips; noisy Ol' Spit Triggs chewing a stalk of straw; Blacktail, neat, nervous, mustached, and taking down the sale on his pad; and Red Joe, whose eyes were furtive with shame. Again Pier blinked.

Sheriff Rexwinkel was merry today, and he waved his cane, and the words flowed from his mouth like straw from the blower of a thresher. "Well, men, here we are. You know these cows, men. Some of the best in the county. An' you all know why. Because they've been raised by one of the best cattlemen this country's ever seen. Just look at 'em. I don't need to spend a lot of time telling you about 'em. You kin see for yourself. There ain't a cutback in the lot. Not a buzzard bait. Not a hatrack, stripper, three-tit. They're all either wet stuff or good sound springers."

Pier smiled tiredly to himself. It amused him to hear this pompous blowhard bragging about his very own work, his breeding skills.

"Just look at them Frisian-Holstein prize winners. Them spots. Them critters is all good grassers. And them snip-nosed steers back there, why, they're the best hamburger on the hoof you ever saw. Fine good long-eared beefsteak."

Eyes became crafty with speculation.

"All right, Pier, lead out yer duke. Your rip-gut bull."

"I ain't got no bull, Rex. I got rid of him. Look at yer list there an' you'll see."

"Oh, that's right. Well, lead out something else then. Anything atall."

Pier led a haltered steer before the crowding farmers. He held tightly onto the halter. The animal gave off a little heat.

"Ha, there he is, boys. Now, what am I bid for this critter? Who'll give me a bid to start 'er off? What? Fifty dollars? Fifty I got. Fifty, fifty, fifty, who'll give a hundred? Hundred, hundred, hundred? How, how, how? Ho, ho, ho? Fifty I got and a hundred I want. FiftyIgotandahundredIwant." Sheriff Rexwinkel caught a gurgling breath. His purpling lips bubbled. "Well, then, try seventy-five. Seventy-five, five, five? Fifty I got, and five I'll take. Five, five, five? How, how, how? Ho, ho, ho?"

Someone raised a finger.

"Seventy-five I got. Who'll give a hundred? 'Dred, 'dred, 'dred? How, how, how?"

Pier mused to himself, studying the slow roll of eyes in the stilled heads of the men around him. Dot-centered, white eyeballs swung back and forth as the creature strolled in a circle before them.

"Ninety, ninety, ninety? Who'll give me ninety? Going at seventy-five. Going once. Going twice. Going three times. Gone. Sold to that gentleman over there with a"—Sheriff Rexwinkel waved his cane at a face for Blacktail—"sold to that man there with a wart on his ear."

Pier brought out another steer.

"An' now what'll you give me for this snip-nosed critter?" Sheriff Rexwinkel pointed his cane.

There was a bid. Two bids. Three. And, in a moment, it too was sold.

When the steers were gone, Pier brought out the calves.

"Now, fellers, you kin see what we got here. Fine good half fats. Pail-fed skimmies. Fine good slick-ears. All good feeder stuff in time. What am I bid? Ho, ho, ho? How, how, how?"

Then came the cows. Pier watched them hammered off, saw strangers lead his good, stupid, cud-chewing cows away. Shred by shred Pier felt himself being torn apart.

At last Pier led forth Young Lysbeth, sister to Young Maybelle.

"One hundred? I got a hundred. Hundred I got an' twenty-five I want. Twenty-five for this fine good springer. Look at her, boys. Look at her. There's probably twins kicking around in her belly right now."

Slow, speculative faces moved amongst the clothes-stiff men. Massive ham-hands bulged in pockets.

"A hundred and twenty-five? How, how, how? Ho, ho, ho? C'mon, men, let's finish off this job with a whing-ding whing-dang sale. I got a hundred, who'll give twenty-five? Twenty-five? Twenty-five? Twenty-five? Not? All right. Going once, going twice, going . . . sold to Red Joe Faber."

Pier handed the halter to Red Joe. He looked at his stubby neighbor briefly; then pushed through the crowding farmers.

Blacktail came fluttering after him. "Pier, if you'll sign this, we'll call it all square."

Pier turned. He glanced at the other, said nothing. With Blacktail's pen he traced out the little row of hen tracks he had learned to scratch as his name.

"Thanks."

Pier paused, held up his hand. "By the way, Blacktail, you might as well sell the rest of my stuff too. The team a horses, plow . . . you know, what the law allows me."

"What?"

"Sure."

"You leavin'?"

"Wal, what else is there?" Pier brushed his face. "Go on. Sell the rest. An' put the check on the top a the telephone."

"Where you goin'?"

"I dunno. I just don't know."

Pier stepped away from the snettering neighbors into the flying red-brown dust.

To himself he muttered, "Blown out, by God."

He was a torn blade of grass, wind-blown, flying over the land, one moment soaring, the next caught on a stone.

He found himself entering the the moment ahead without thought or plan. Where to now?

On an impulse he decided to take a last walk over the farm, to torture himself for the last time with scenes where he had ached and dreamed, where he had sweat blood.

He swung past the old straw-pile butt, now a frozen mass of brown vinegary manure. He stepped through the willow windbreak west of the barn, and, back creaking, crawling through a barbed-wire fence, started across the hog pasture. He skirted the lizard-wriggling edges of the gulch.

The southwest wind was bone-chilling. He could feel by the

touch of the cold on his skin just where his patched overall was wearing thin.

Dust rose. It stung his eyes. He narrowed his eyelids to razor-thin slits.

He climbed a fence, entered the cow pasture. With dimming eyes he looked at the rugged breaks beyond the Big Sioux. He had once worshiped those massive Hills of the Lord. A streaming red-brown wind almost obscured the bare, gaunt oaks on their crests.

With the worn toe of his leather shoe he scuffed the earth, kicking up a blister of stones: a crystal pebble, a bright bit of pink-purple quartzite, a gleaming green. He looked up, sniffed the air, held his aching back.

He pressed on, pushing his rugged, wind-scoured, wind-bitten face into the cold. He drew his cap down deep over his white old head.

Tiny bubbles of energy puffed up within him. Little wisps of song, like smoke rings, floated upward in his mind. But before the impulses became full-grown, the clefs rived, and vanished, as if ripped by a savage hand.

He strode on. He was a wanderer, a captain without a ship or port.

He came to the west fence of the pasture; turned north. He strolled along the edge of the valley. Below lay tossing bults and bosses.

He looked down the trail of the afternoon when he and little Teo had gone grape hunting in the hills of Gitchie Manitou. He remembered that soil-wise Old Dreamer Pederson had called it the land where the Great Spirit dwelt. Pier smiled at the fable.

He fronted a low hill, climbed it, fronted another tall rising slope, reached its crest too.

At the north-line fence Pier stopped to catch his breath. One of the new hollow steel posts he had bought the year before moaned in the wind. He crossed his arms over the top of a wooden post, leaned and looked into the valley.

Below, a long way down, lay the burrowing Blood Run Creek and the tableland where the mounds of the Mound Builders lay. He saw where Pederson lived on a headlong cliff.

He studied the mounds. Pederson had once told him that somewhere east in Iowa the strange ancients had built a mound resembling a sleeping woman. She lay flat on her back on the land. She lay

as high as a haystack and as long as a prairie swell. Pier's eyes ran over the curving sweep of the mounds below, saw how each mound became a dot in a serpentine row. No wonder Âlde Romke had believed that ancient peoples had once worshiped there, facing the Hills of the Lord to the west. This was holy land! The footprints of religion were in it.

He mused. Âlde Romke was probably right. A person could sense such things. It was like coming upon an abandoned house. There was always evidence in it that it had once been full to bursting with family life, that the teakettle had once sizzled on the stove. And if one looked closely enough one usually found that the walls of the kitchen had been soaked with the vapors of many cookings.

Âlde Romke had always claimed that the Frisians had sailed all the seas, the great and the small, before even the Wylde Wytsingen, the Vikings, had dared to venture forth, that they had settled in Chile, Mexico, India, Greece, Norway, Britain. Even America before the time of Columbus. And maybe they had. The old mounds down there did look a lot like the Frisian terps of Europe, those bults built to give safety should the North or Frisian Sea come rushing in. Maybe the mounds were the remaining evidences of a lost tribe of Frisians. Through the ages, after Atlantis had fallen into the sea, many Frisians had been lost in the wallowing reaches of the earth. It could be.

Pier studied the mounds, tried to push back the mists of time, tried to see the ancients face to face. But the vision would not come clear. The ancients were gone forever.

He nodded his head. Gone forever. Ae. Just as he too would soon be gone, soon be out of the mind of man.

A bitter thought possessed him. The fiery Frisians had given England its law and language, had given her many of its legends and myths, had given her its heroes Hengist and Horsa, but had never been given credit for it. And now he too here in America, having given his work and his dreams, would never be honored for it. Ae, injustice was still afoot in the world. The Âlde Han was still at work. The old song and dance.

Wal, such was life. So it went. Grass grew, grass withered.

How long, how long had the grass been blowing?

Pier's old face chilled to gray stone. He stared at the moving soil, at the restless land, at the flying loess. He winked. He took off his

mitten and, with a rough red knuckle, dug a speck of stinging dirt out of his eye.

Why hadn't he and the land been able to get along? Why? Pier lifted the massive question in his mind and turned the long bole of it over. Why?

He had loved Siouxland. He had wanted it. He had tried to tie himself to an alien past, to the old Mound Builders, to the Sioux, to the heroes Jesse James and Buckskin Teddy. To Cyclops and Ulysses even. What was wrong?

Ae, he had tried to catch his anchor into the soils, had tried to get his roots down so deep that neither the wind nor flood, heat nor cold, could ever tear him out again . . . and had failed.

Did a man have to die before he became a part of the old lady earth? Did a man's land work easier after it had been sweetened with the dust of his blood and brains?

Pier stood up and shivered. Life was a double task here on the new prairies. A man had to fight the Âlde Han, the elements; a man had to get his roots into the soil, earn his birthright. A double task. Ae.

He turned on his chilled toes, started for Red Bluff. He slutfed through a shallow swale that was gray with shrieking weeds. He went past Ol' Spit Triggs's rendering works. Its retching smells were strong even against the wind.

He started up the slope of Red Bluff.

On the peak of the hill he stooped over and picked up a red stone and hurled it far out. He was a blinded Cyclops hurling a stone at an invisible enemy.

He watched the stone hurtling away from him. It traveled in a long arch. It went upward, slow; held steady; then, descending, fell ever more swiftly to the ground. The arch was life.

He looked north, saw the slow swells of the land waving away toward Squaw Tit and Dell Valley, toward the ripped wounds of the red Palisades and Devil's Gulch, toward Nertha's land. He looked west, saw the bluffs the ancients had worshiped. He looked south, saw the land falling away toward Canton. He looked east, saw the land smoothing away into an expanse of horizon—so far that it was like looking into the very ends of the world itself. With the sand-sharp, glint-bright wind beating on his back, he leaned forward. Rags of dust, like leg-long cranes, flew past him. He stared ahead

into the grayish white-blue band where earth and sky were blended. He wondered if out there, out there where eternity began, he would find peace someday.

He stepped down the hill toward the road. His eye happened to see a splash of green beneath the fence. Curious, he kicked at it, wondered how grass so green could be growing in so arid a country. He knelt. He took off his mittens, tore up the sod to search out its secret. What had kept these few spears of cord grass alive? The sod parted reluctantly. When he lifted it up, he found the ground frost-wet. He flupped it a few times in his hand, gave it another toss, dropped it. He stood up. Shading his eyes against the wind, he peered down the fence. Sure enough, there were traces of green all along it. He remembered now that oats or corn accidentally spilled under the fence had always seemed taller to him than crops in the field, that the sun had never seemed to burn the spilled grain like it had the planted. He shook his head. He couldn't understand it. Land needed stirring up, needed plowing to make it grow . . . and yet, here beneath the fence, where the sod was as hard as rocks, the grain and the grass grew best.

He stepped past Kaia's place, looked at the gray house half obscured by the twigs of the lilac and chokecherry bushes, looked at the barn and wondered how Stephan was making it now.

He came to the southeast corner of his farm. He paused for breath.

The wind began to die down.

Rested, he started for home, climbing the slow rise west. Cars brommed up the highway past him. The last of the buzzard flies were leaving his sale.

He scuffed down the hill, walking alongside the gulch. He entered the dead orchard. He walked up to the house. The wind had almost stopped. The yard was stealthy-quiet.

He looked around. Ae, the moment the sale was over the buzzards had left. Not one had remained behind to commiserate with him. Not one. They hadn't even bothered to wish him good luck for tomorrow.

He entered the kitchen. On the phone lay the check from Blacktail. Below it stood his brown cowhide suitcase.

He folded the check into a neat square, dropped it into his scabbed leather purse.

He opened the suitcase, took a few clothes off the hooks behind the door, balled them up, stuffed them in. "Might as well fill the chuck bag with all the duds I can." He took off his patched, faded overall, stuffed that in too. He put on a clean one.

He made one last survey of the house to see if he might have left anything. He stepped through the living room, through the parlor, through the bedroom where Nertha had died and where he and Kaia had lusted. All the rooms were empty, dusty.

He climbed the stairs, passed through Teo's room. It was empty. He remembered how, on the morning of his wedding day, he had awakened in it eighteen years ago.

He glanced in the bedroom where Ålde Romke and Ma Lysbeth had lived for a while. It was empty.

He opened the door to the south room, the guest room where he and Nertha had loved one white winter day. Noticing an old, red-trimmed trunk on the far side of the room, he stepped toward it. He flipped back the lid of the trunk. Pier caught sight of silver lettering. In the dim light Pier could not see the wall Bible sayings distinctly but he knew that one of them said, GOD IS THE HEAD OF THIS HOUSE; the other, THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.

He picked both up. "Never kin tell, might have some use for them someday."

As he turned to leave, the floor sank away. There was a cracking, a splintering of wood. Nails screeched. Earthquake? The great cave-in at last? Pier hoarsed in a sudden breath.

The floor sank a bit more, then steadied.

A quick glance, and he saw that the ceiling and the roof had parted above the door, that the floor had opened at his feet. The subsoil beneath the south wing of the house had given way. The weight of his body had been just enough to start it.

Pier's eyes opened momentarily; then half closed. Now he had seen everything.

He went downstairs, stuffed the placards in the suitcase, closed it, stepped outdoors.

Shep the dog ran up to him, sat down, whined. Pier touched the animal. Shep licked his hands, got to his feet, rubbed Pier's leg.

Dusk was falling rapidly. The dust flowing over the land was the rising mist of a vast sea.

He started up the lane, carrying his suitcase, Shep following. He glanced back for a last look. Like a great gray whale, the old house Âlde Romke had built lay cleavered beneath the skies.

His feet did not track well.

He crossed the culvert.

Where to now? Where?

To Ma Lysbeth?

No.

To Teo? Theodor?

"Wal," he said to himself, "wal, why not? I might as well. It won't hurt none to go see the boy. See what he's up to. An' then go on. Somewheres. Shucks, after all, I'm a young buck yit. My heart's still green."

He climbed the hill, the dog pattering in the dust behind him. Night as black as chimney soot fell around upon him.

Blacktail's whistle in Starum blew up. It screamed in his ears. Eerie, piercing.

Lifting his hoar head defiantly, Pier roared back at it, sang loud, trying to drown it out:

"Oh, braid her a crown of clover,
Braid it pink and green and silver.
Oh, cover her over with clover,
Ae, crown her the queen forever."

POSTLUDE

A COCK ROBIN AND HIS MATE, CHILDREN OF THE children of a robling's son, sat blinking white rings in an old dead limb of the box elder. Overhead flew hundreds of shivering robins, hurrying to the southland about for summery climes.

But cock robin, loving his home, stayed in the limb with his mate.

Another flock went wing-wapping over, calling them to come to the south. But again cock robin and his mate stayed behind.

Another, and still another migrating swarm, flew over. But cock robin stayed.

Until at last, a fifth flock came flitting and chittering by, riding a cold drilling wind, and cock robin and his mate, chilled, lonesome,

flew up, and joined the climbing and diving brothers and sisters, and were gone.

The fork in the box elder was empty.

The ball of earth was spinning: another year had vanished from view forever.

GLOSSARY

of unusual words and phrases (most of them Frisian)
which appear in the text of the novel.

Ae, de dea sit har yn it herte. *Ay, death sits (resides) in their heart.*

Ae. De Wrâld sil forgean. *Ay. The world will pass away (be destroyed).*

Ae, dou âlde grize bolle. *Ah, thou old gray bull.*

Ae, it grêf. *Ay, the grave.*

Âld Fryslân. *Old Friesland. Also known in ancient times as Frisia. Located in north Netherlands and in northwest Germany near Denmark, including all the Frisian Islands in the North Sea.*

Âld Starum. *Old Starum. Legendary capital of ancient Frisia, now known as Stavoren, the Netherlands.*

Âlde. *Old, or old one.*

Âlde Beppe. *Old grandmother.*

Âlde Folkwâlda. *A family name probably referring to folk living near the Wâlden, a wooded district in east Friesland. (In Anglo-Saxon literature Folcwalda is the father of Hengist.)*

Âlde Han. *Old Hand, or Old Hired Hand. A mischievous, playful devil or evil Spirit whom men blame for their hard luck. A convenient scapegoat.*

Âlde Kening. *Old King.*

Âlde Mem. *Old mother.*

âlden. *Elders.*

As ik kin, dan sil ik dy helpe. *If I can, then shall I help you.*

awright fine. *Frisian-Americanism for "all right."*

beek. *Frisian-Americanism for "big."*

beestings. *The first milk given by a cow after calving.*

bern. *Child.*

Bernlef. *A folksinger or skald. He was blind. Fought by the Druids. (Not an isolated occurrence, by the way. Teachers and minister-priests often have more trouble appreciating the poets of their day than do common people.) He sang of Frisian heroes and gods. Later, was converted to psalm singing. Lived in the eighth century.*

bernsbern. *See "'n bernsbern."*

bidimje. *To calm, to smooth down.*

bit. *Frisian-Americanism for "bitch."*

bitsie. *Frisian-Americanism for "bitch."*

boerekofje. *Farmer's "coffee," or drink. Hot beer with brandy, nutmeg, and sugar.*

brommed. *From the Frisian "bromme," meaning "to growl."*

bult. *A word used in both the Frisian and Dutch languages. In Frisian it is a very common word for pile, heap, swell, knob. In Dutch it is used almost exclusively for the hump of a hunchback. Bult so caught the feel of the prairie knob that I decided to use it.*

De Âlde Han sil dy slaen (sil him slaen). *The Old Hired Hand shall beat or slay thee (shall slay him).*

Dêr wennet er, hjir stiet er. *There lives he, here stands he.*

Druid. *A pagan priest who taught children and tended religious needs. A graduated medicine man.*

en myn pake, O, al it Fryske folk. *And my grandfather, oh, all the Frisian folk.*

fammen. *Girls, maidens.*

Flechtsje it lân út. *Flee the land (out of the land).*

Fosite. *A pagan god. Frisians worshiped in his temple on the North Sea island of Fositelân. Legend has it that this island could be either the modern-day Helgoland or Ameland.*

Free Frisians. *Since time before Christ, Frisians were lovers of freedom, both for themselves as a nation and for themselves as individuals; and they made it a point to have the phrase written into their statutes, their treaties with enemies, etc.*

Freon. *Friend.*

Freon, sil ik dy hwat helpe? *Friend, shall I help you a little (somewhat)?*

Freya. *One of "the most propitious of goddesses. She loves music, spring, and flowers, and is particularly fond of the Elves (fairies). She is very fond of love ditties, and all lovers would do well to invoke her." Quote taken from Bulfinch's* Age of Fable, *page 336, Everyman's Library. The Frisian name for the sixth day of the week is Freed.*

Frije Friezen, hâld goed wacht tsjin 't noarderlân, Hwant út dy grime hern komt kwea ús oan. *Free Frisians, be on guard against the north country, because out of (from) that grim corner evil (always) comes upon us. The couplet probably refers to the Viking raids.*

Frisian. *In ancient times, even before the time of Christ, the Frisians lived where they still live today. See "Âld Fryslân" above. They were tribal cousins of the Angles and Saxons. In those days a Frisian, a Saxon, and an Angle, with some effort, understood each other. Even today a close relationship exists between the Frisian and English languages. Many Frisians migrated to Britain with the Angles and Saxons in the fifth century* A.D., *and after, and left their stamp on the English countryside, e.g., many place names end in "um" and "am" as they do in Fryslân. It is also thought that the following place names suggest ancient Frisian settlements: Friesthorpe, Frieston in Caythorpe, Friezeland, all in Lincolnshire; Frizinghall, Fryston, in Yorkshire; Frisby-on-the-Wreak, Old Frisby, in Leicester; Friston, in Sussex; Frizington, in Cumberland; Frizenham, in Devonshire; Friesengen; Dumfriesshire.*

Frisian-Holstein, or Holstein-Frisian. *Breed of black-and-white cattle. In Europe they are known as Frisian cattle; in America, through a mistake, they were first called Holsteins, later, to correct the error, Holstein-Frisians.*

Friso. *Sometimes known as Frixo. The legendary ancestor of the Frisians. He is supposed to have built dikes, to have constructed terps or high mounds as a place of refuge when the North or Frisian Sea came crashing in over the lowlands, and to have organized societies of druids. (See "Druid" above.)*

Frixen. *Family name in the novel. Comes from Friso, or Frixo.*

frou. *Mistress, wife.*

Frysk folk, lit de wylde Wytsingen net oerwinne. *Frisian folk, let not the wild Vikings overwin (overcome) us.*

greate. *Big one. Literally, great one.*

Greate Pier. *A man of huge frame and a great fighter for Frisian freedom. His real name was Peter Van Heemstra. He died October 28, 1520, and was buried at Snits, Fryslân.*

grime. *(Two syllables, accent on first: grim'-e.) In this connection means grim; usually used as a noun meaning anger.*

healwei. *Halfway. Second syllable rhymes with "rye."*

Hengist. *With his brother Horsa led the first Germanic invasion of Britain, about* A.D. *450. See Book Two, 1, of this work. For another version of the trick involved in the expression, "a hide of land," see the*

story of Dido and the choosing of the site for New Carthage in Virgil's Aeneid, *Book First. Also, see under "dido" in Webster.*

Horsa. *See above under "Hengist."*

Hy is 'n bastert fan Babylon. *He is a bastard from Babylon.*

It Âlde Boek. *The Old Book. An imaginary book dealing with Frisian legend and history.*

It Âlde Lân. *The Old Land, (The Old Country).*

It Boek fan de Psalmen. *The Book of Psalms.*

it friest. *It freezes (it is freezing).*

it Fryske folk. *The Frisian folk or people.*

It jonkje hat 'n wjirm yn it brein. *The youth (young man) has a worm in the brain.*

It moat mâl, oars is 't net moai. *It must be done impetuously (madly), otherwise it isn't nice (beautiful.) Or, put more succinctly: He's gotta do everything like a mad bull, otherwise he isn't happy.*

It sit hjir goed. *It's good (nice) sitting here.*

it stran fan 'e Ganges. *The strand or shore of the Ganges River. One legend has it that in ancient times the Frisians came from India. Another has it that a colony of Frisians settled there and later returned to the fatherland. According to both legends the Frisians had an orderly way of settling their problem of overpopulation, i.e., as soon as there wasn't enough to eat, lots were cast, and a tenth of the people sailed away. Whether fact or fiction, it is true that the Frisian people as a nation suffered many disasters. In addition to ceaseless warfare with the Franks to the south, the Danes to the east, and the Vikings (Wytsingen) to the north, the Frisians were constantly battling against the North Sea. Many thousands were drowned, and cities were wiped out, when the North Sea finally engulfed the land in the thirteenth century. A little change in fortune and it is entirely possible that today we could have been speaking a modified Frisian and not English. The Frisians were one of the first Teutonic tribes to develop, independent of the Roman influence, a far-reaching legal system, as for instance in the* Skeltana Riucht, *an important document for all English-speaking legal historians. (Harvard University Press, 1939.)*

Kening fan Inglelân. *King of England.*

Kermis. *According to Webster: "An annual outdoor festival held in the Low Countries of Europe and in French Flanders, characterized by feasting, dancing, clownish processions, and other forms of amusement." In other words, a gay, riotous occasion. The Frisian word for the same thing is "merke." See below.*

Lân fan myn âldfaers. *Land of my old fathers (ancestors).*

Lit it him nou mar oerkomme, Âlde Han. Lit it him nou mar oerkomme. Ik waskje myn hannen fan him ôf. *Literally: Let it come upon (over) him now, Old Hand. Let it come upon him now. I wash my hands of him. ("It" refers to doom, to fate, to just deserts.)*

mem. *Mother.*

Merke. *A fair or carnival.*

'n bernsbern. *A grandchild.*

'n stamhâlder. *Literally: a stemholder. A first-born son who keeps up the family name. In my own case, I am the first-born son of my father, Feike Feikema, who in turn was the first-born son of my grandfather, Feike Feikema, and so on. I have been able to trace this back for at least eight generations. There is a story that it goes back fourteen, recorded in a family Bible. Unfortunately, none of my great-uncles and great-aunts (my grandfather Feike and my grandmother Grytsje are dead) know where that Bible is. If the story is true, then my name should read: Feike Feikema XIV. It is also told that the first-born for those fourteen generations was always a boy. Curiously enough, my first child was a girl, Freya, a tradition buster, with hair as red as my beard. According to a modern-day interpretation, the name "Feike" came from the ancient proper name of "Fridu-rik," meaning "peace." The first element "Fridu" is the basis for the name "Frederick" or "Friedrich," a name by which I am also known. (The Indo-European basis for "Fridu" is "Pri-tu"; "Pri" meaning "love," "friendship." "Fridu-rik" was reduced to "Friducho" when the second, a nickname for the first, came to be accepted as proper itself. "Friducho" too, in turn, was reduced to "Fricchо" by the process of nicknaming. "Fricchо" became "Ficco," and "Ficco" became "Feike." The last syllable, "ma," in the family name of "Feikema," means "man."*

Nertha. *According to some, she was the goddess of earth, worshiped by the Angles. Also, according to some, many of the Angles settled in Frisia, since their language and mores and pagan religion was similar to that of the Frisians. Charles M. Doughty in his* The Dawn in Britain *poetizes that she was worshiped by the priestess Fridia. Fridia married Brennus, first great Briton warrior. Brennus led the Gauls against Rome. Among his warriors, says Doughty, were Eormen, a Frisian duke, and Witta, duke of the Angles.*

Nimath ure saxa. *This is very old Frisian and means: Take your knives.*

Nou, dou âlde grize bolle. *Now, you old gray bull.*

Nou haw ik it wurk dien. *Now I have done the work. Or, Now I have completed my mission on earth.*

Nou, nou, breinroer, bidimje. *Now, now, furious one (roaring brain), cool down.*

O God, hâld Jins ear nei my, hear myn redenen. O God, straf my net yn Jins grime. *(See under "grime" above.)* O God, unrjocht klibbet oan myn hannen. O God, iepenje myn herte, sadat ik de deadslep net slep. *Literally: O God, hold your ear to (near) me, hear my reasons (pleas). O God, punish (strafe) me not in your anger (grimness). O God, unrighteousness clings onto my hands. O God, open my heart, so that I the death sleep shall not sleep (lest I sleep the death sleep).*

oprjochte Fries. *True Frisian. Literally, upright Frisian.*

paticle work. *Frisian-Americanism for "particular work." Pronounced pa-tee'-cle.*

Pier. *Hero of the novel. See "Greate Pier" above, after whom he was named.*

Reaklif. *The Red Cliff, located near Starum, Fryslân's old capital.*

Redbad. *Last of Frisian pagans. Defeated by Pepin (692), and Karl Martel (716). See Book Two, 1, of this work.*

Seguener. *Gypsy.*

Sint Steffens hoarn. *St. Stephen's horn. A merry greeting at Christmastime.*

Sit del! *Sit down!*

Siz it my. *Say it to me.*

Skotlân. *Scotland.*

snettering. *Chattering. See "snetterjen" below. It expresses chattering in so derisive a manner for me that I can't resist using it.*

snetterjen. *Chattering.*

Soa? *So? Is that so?*

Soan. *Son.*

Soan, dy faem is net goed genôch. *Son, that maiden is not good enough.*

soan fan Inglelân. *Son of England.*

Soan, hast it forgetten? *Son, hast forgotten it?*

Soan, kinst him hâlde? *Son, canst hold him?*

stamhâlder. *See "'n stamhâlder" above.*

Starum, Fryslân. *See "Âld Starum" above.*

Stavo. *One of the very earliest of Frisian gods. He was probably a real man, a leader who was made a hero by the bards, and a god by the people. The city of Starum (Stavoren) was named after him.*

swervelings. *From the Frisian "swerve" meaning "to wander."*

Switserlân. *Switzerland.*

Tabbo. *Fought Danes and Romans. Lived about* A.D. *85.*

Tamfane. *From the Frisian phrase, "To âlden fane," meaning, "to the old temple." The word "fane" has various meanings. According to Webster: "fane, n. (L.* fanum, *a sanctuary, a temple, from* fari, *to speak, consecrate.) A temple; a place consecrated to religion; a church; used in poetry." According to Skeats,* Etymological Dictionary of the English Language, *"Fane, a temple. (L.) In Shak. Cor. i. 10.20.—Lat.* fanum, *a temple; supposed to be derived from* fari, *to speak, in the sense 'to dedicate.' Derivative:* fan-at-ic. *q.v." According to Waling Dykstra,* Uit Friesland's Volksleven *"fane" means "banner" in Frisian. Dykstra relates the following interesting legend concerning "Tamfane": when Friso left his far-off ancestral land (India?) he took with him certain relics, among them a red banner (fane.) When he settled in what is now Fryslân, he built a temple dedicated to the old banner (to âlden fane). Later, the temple itself got to be called "Tamfane," a contraction of "to âlden fane." Another story has it that Tamfane was the name of a goddess to whom a temple was dedicated. Doughty, in his glossary for* The Dawn in Britain, *lists "Tamfana" as recorded in Tacitus. The Frisian language, though an old one, shows relatively fewer changes than most languages.*

It has become truly the working tool of the people, so much so that reduction and assimilation have made it a sort of shorthand, a kind of terse poetry. There are many examples of this. "Âldfaers" was undoubtedly a longer word at one time. The original word for both "âldfaers" and "eldfathers" was probably the same. The same for "broer" and "brother," "waer" and "weather."

Thé. *Tea.*

Thor (Tonger). *The god of Thunder, the god who presided over all mischievous spirits in the elements. Our Thursday is named after him, as well as the Frisian Tongersdei.*

Twa kear twa is fjouwer. *Two times two is four.*

Wainsbox. *Wagon box. (Both the Frisian and Old English for "wagon" is "wain.")*

Weird. *As a noun, the literal sense is, "That which happens" or "that which comes to pass." Fate, destiny.*

"Woaste Friezen". *Wild, untamed, unchristianized Frisians. "Woaste" means "waste, desolate."*

Wo'dammit. *A doubling up of "Wodan" and "dammit."*

Wodan. *A god. Father of Thor (Tonger). The furious one. Our Wednesday was named after him, as well as the Frisian Woansdei.*

Wrâlda. *The ancient of ancients. He was supposed to be the father of all gods. The Frisian "wrâld," the English "world," the Old Norse "verold," are related to it. The original meaning of the word was "man's life, man's dwelling."*

Wylde Wytsingen. *Wild Vikings.*

yn Grikelân, yn it lân hwer Alexander de Greate. *Literally: in Greek land, in the land where Alexander the Great.*

yn it grêf. *In the grave.*

Manfred, F
This is the year

NERL

Manfred, F
This is the year

NERL

MAR 26 1981
Donald Johnson
DL JUL '81
P MAY '82
NOV 13 1982 4/60
NW K MAR '84

State of Vermont
Department of Libraries
Northeast Regional Library
P. O. Box 188
St. Johnsbury, Vt. 05819

DATE DUE

MAR 26 1981			MAR 03 '92		
DL	NW '84				
May 27 '81					
P	MAY '82				
NOV 13 1982					
NW K	MAR '84				
JAN 30 '84					
N 42 W	JUL 87				
JAN 22 1990	MAY 9 – 1994				
FEB 05 1990					

This Gregg Press edition includes a new Introduction by **Max Westbrook,** and a revised, up-to-date map of Siouxland, created by the author.

Frederick Manfred was born in 1912 on a farm near Doon, Iowa, of Frisian-Saxon parents. He attended Calvin College in Michigan where he began to have some of his stories and poems published. His first novel, *The Golden Bowl* (1944) received widespread critical acclaim and 22 others have followed it. Most of his writing is set in what he has named "Siouxland," that area where Minnesota, South Dakota, Nebraska and Iowa meet. By critical consensus, *Conquering Horse* (1959) is one of the best novels written about the American Indian, *Lord Grizzly* (1954) is one of the best Mountain Man novels, and *This Is the Year* (1947) is one of the few great novels about farmers in America. In 1967, he was awarded the Distinguished Achievement Award from the Western Literature Association. Frederick Manfred currently lives in a stone house he helped build in Luverne, Minnesota, which is part of Siouxland. He is the father of three grown children.

Max Westbrook Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin, a distinguished writer and critic of western literature, and a former president of the Western Literature Association.

The Gregg Press Western Fiction Series

The Spinners' Book of Fiction *by Gertrude Atherton et al.*
Remember the Alamo *by Amelia Barr*
Destry Rides Again *by Max Brand*
The Bandit of Hell's Bend *by Edgar Rice Burroughs*
The Deputy Sheriff of Comanche County
by Edgar Rice Burroughs
The Years of the Locust *by Loula Grace Erdman*
These Thousand Hills *by A. B. Guthrie, Jr.*
Canyon Passage *by Ernest Haycox*
The Earthbreakers *by Ernest Haycox*
One More River to Cross *by Will Henry*
Indian Country *by Dorothy M. Johnson*
The Wonderful Country *by Tom Lea*
The Last Hunt *by Milton Lott*
This is the Year *by Frederick Manfred*
Sundown *by John Joseph Mathews*